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E3 And The Hot 50

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com
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The Electronic Entertainment Expo continues to transform. The show is still trying to find the perfect balance between industry event and consumer show, but this year's expo was certainly better than the last at meeting this goal. We aren't quite there yet, as the show needs to find more ways to entertain the consumers and still let the business get done, though I'm happy to see it moving in the right direction.

That said, the event is long. We go from Friday to Friday working crazy days to see and do all the show has to offer. The goal, of course, is to report on as many games as we can. We see debut game trailers, and both hands-off and hands-on demos. But like Transformers, there is more than meets the eye.

E3 is a chance for game publishers and the industry to dazzle, so understanding and interpreting E3 demos is a skill unto itself. The most notorious offender, and the one the press is on the lookout for, is the hands-off demo that looks like it is being played, but in reality is closer to a trailer than a true representation of game code running.

For example, some demos are technically played, but scripted events are triggered by a single press of the button. Developers use this technique to show things that can happen in the final game, but are hard to recreate on a stage or in a demo room. Some find this massively offensive, and fans have reacted harshly when there is a delta between the quality of these early sequences and the final product – see the infamous Watch Dogs demo from 2013. While I always prefer pure code, I think as long as the demo represents things that the developer is trying to work into the final game, the practice, while not perfect, is acceptable.

To be fair to developers, E3 is a wrench in their works. They are pushing hard to finish the game in time for its release, and creating a standalone demo that highlights all the game's features in a small amount of time is more than a bit counterintuitive. However, it is important to market your game, so E3 is basically a necessary evil for game development.

Other games, like Cyberpunk 2077, the press doesn't get to play (though we can see a developer playing it, and I even touched the sticks for a second to confirm it was real), but if we ask the right questions and come in a little skeptical we can find the truth of the demos we see. You can tell by the events that unfold what is real and what is fake (and frankly, I think there is less illusion than people think).

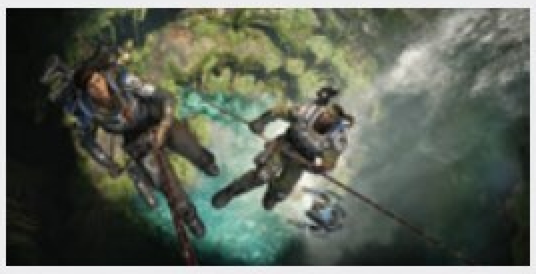
This is the heart of the Hot 50. We search through the games amid all the hype, but we know that games at E3 are there to entice us, to leave with us with a sense of longing. So our Hot 50 is part intuition and part hype, but like E3 it is certainly a lot of fun and gets us excited about the future.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,

P.S. Since Destiny 2: Forsaken is our cover story and we dove deeper into this game than we could ever get at E3, we opted to take it off the Hot 50 even though the game was at the show. Also, we removed The Awesome Adventures of Captain Spirit and Unravel Two since we had the games available for review.

28 **Destiny 2: Forsaken**
Bungie teams up with High Moon Studios to bring us a dramatic new vision of the Destiny universe. Forsaken shakes up many of the core systems of play, like revised weapon slots and mission structure, and simultaneously introduces a ton of new content, including two fascinating destinations, new supers for each of the classes, a hybrid cooperative/competitive game mode, and more. We dive deep to discover how the fall expansion aims to reinvigorate the hobby. ***by Matt Miller***



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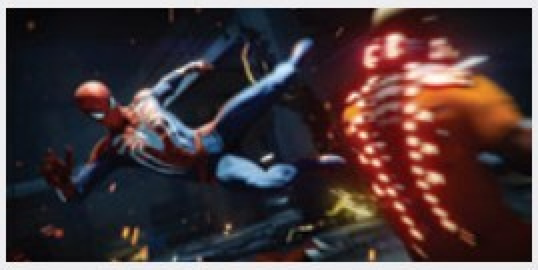
Xbox had a strong E3 by celebrating third-party games, showcasing Cyberpunk 2077, and teasing the future.



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Sony focused on games like Death Stranding, and The Last of Us Part II, as promised.

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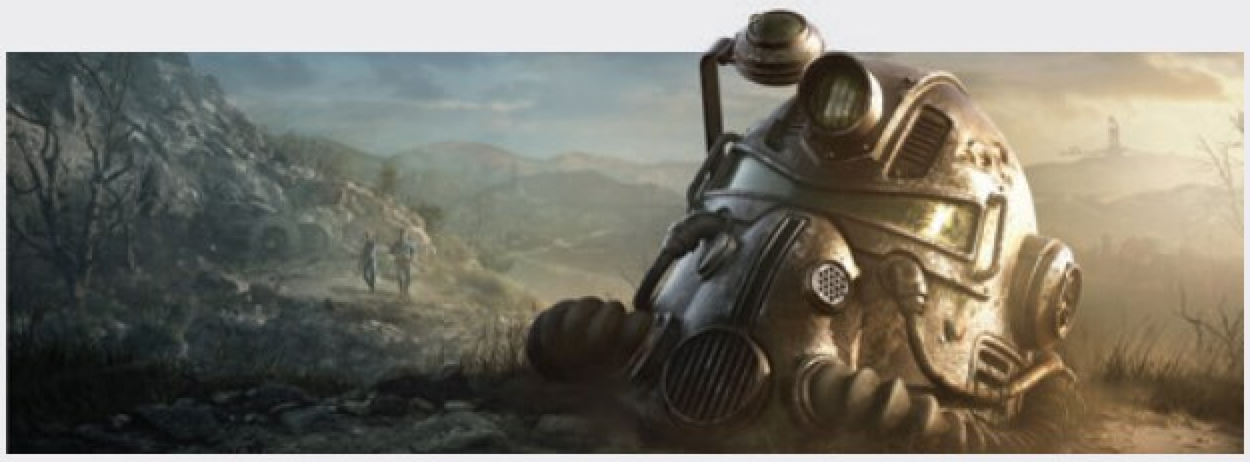
For better and worse, Nintendo dedicated its E3 almost entirely on Super Smash Bros. Ultimate.



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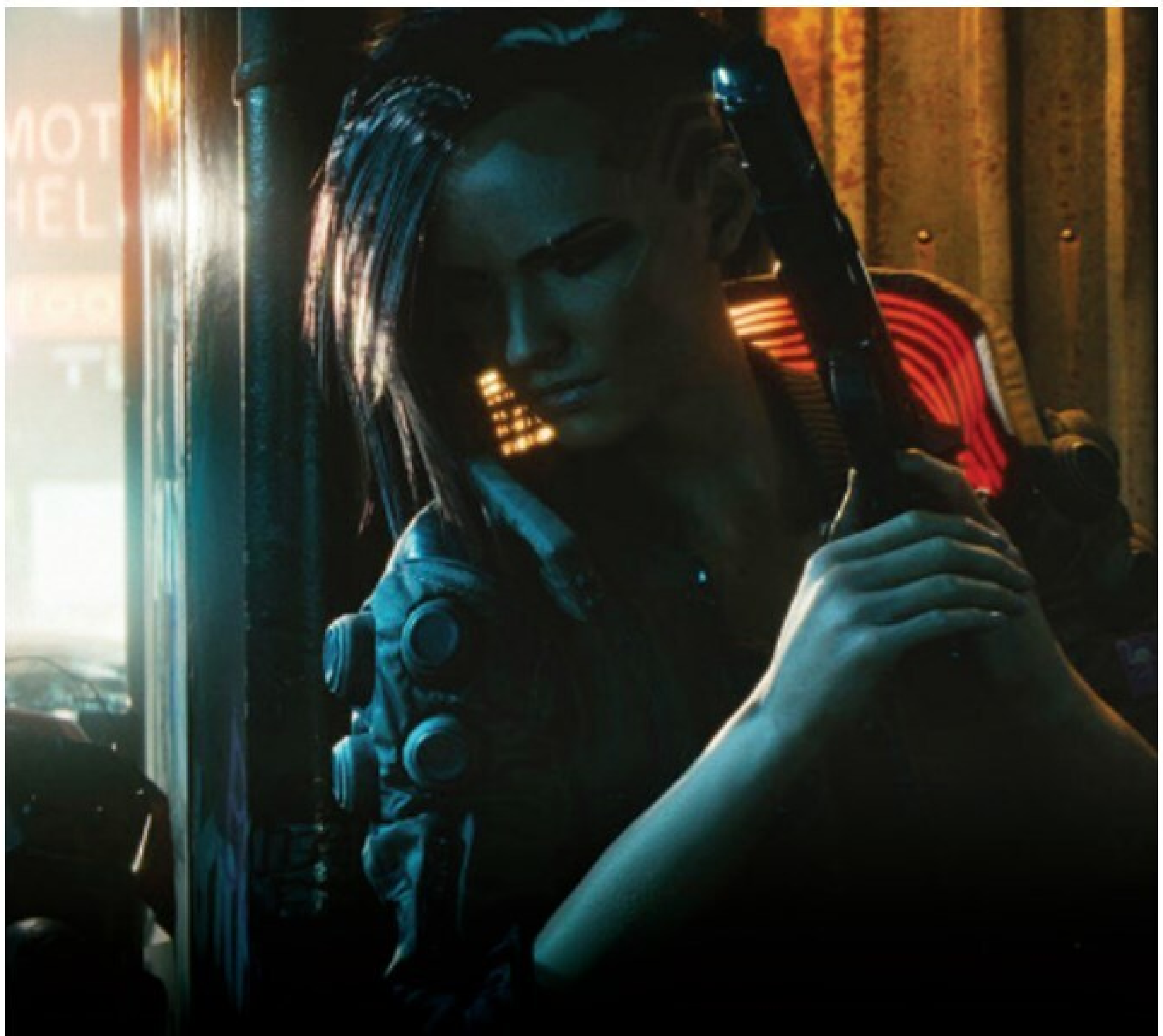
Not every game at the show was there in playable form, but that didn't make them any less exciting.

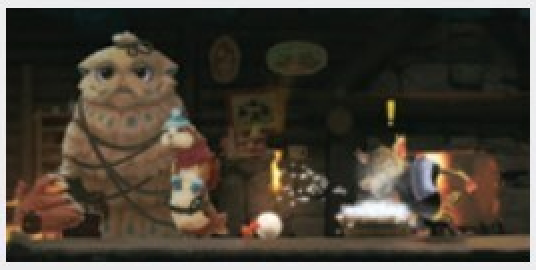
96 **Game Over: E3's Missing In Action**
We round up the conspicuous absences.

89 **Vampyr**
The studio behind Life is Strange explores the world of vampires during the early 20th century.

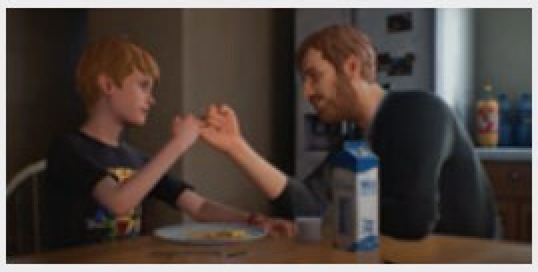
90 **Jurassic World Evolution**
We built a park, tried to contain the dinosaurs as best we could (we couldn't), and lived to tell you if you should attempt the same.



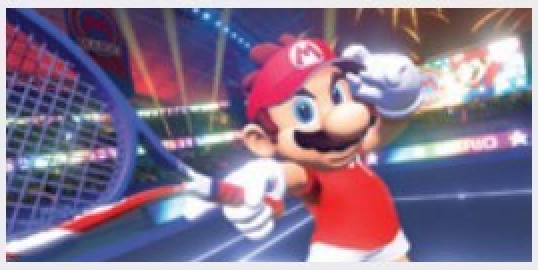
44 **The E3 Hot 50**
It's that time of the year again. We all spent a busy week in Los Angeles playing tons of games and whittled our favorites down to 50 for your perusal.



91 **Yoku's Island Express**
Trust us – this Metroid-inspired game where you play as a dung beetle is worth your time.



92 **The Awesome Adventures Of Captain Spirit**
Dontnod's standalone Life Is Strange story is worth checking out.



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Mario Tennis on Wii U was a big bummer. Thankfully, the latest console Mario tennis is a big improvement.

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feedback

This month readers look to the past for intriguing game settings, question the future of console technology, and try their darnedest to convince us that we actually hate Destiny. It gets weird.

So What's Next?

While I avidly follow gaming news, I've started to wonder just where Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo can innovate for their next generation of consoles. Firstly, the controllers for the PS4 and Xbox One already seem to be at the pinnacle of achievement. How can they make them more comfortable and responsive than their current forms? Also, where can graphics go from here? We've already transitioned from 2D to 3D and standard definition to high definition – where else is there besides consistent 4K and HDR? Hopefully, you can waylay my concerns about the future.

Nathan Scolaro
via email

First of all, Nathan, you don't have to worry about Nintendo – we're sure whatever its next console entails will be just as strange and unpredictable as all the previous ones. As for Sony and Microsoft, you're largely correct; until some evil genius invents a real-life Matrix, visual improvements are probably going to be more incremental than previous leaps. Hopefully that encourages developers to pursue more gameplay-oriented innovations – looks aren't everything, after all.

Challenge Accepted

Thank you for your recent article on women in gaming (Women Creating A Brighter Future For Games, issue 302). I grew up on video games but never dreamed of it as a career; girls weren't allowed. I still feel like an outcast as a middle-aged woman who plays everything from GTA V to my old copy of Empire Earth. However, when my teenage daughters started to brag about how cool their mom is for playing video games, I realized they had a passion too and it was time to become proactive. I am an I-O psychology major and have a master's degree in organizational leadership, so I have a prime opportunity to encourage girls into the industry. I also recently started and am an instructor for a Girls Who Code club. I will do whatever it takes to get these girls there and make them leaders in the industry.

Bethany J. Royer-DeLong
via email

I'm writing to tell you that Kimberly Wallace's article inspired me to give my dream another shot. I jumped into college right after high school, ready to pursue my game design dreams. After being sexually harassed by one of my professors, I dropped out. I wasn't ready for college and I certainly wasn't ready for that. I shelved the idea of game design for a long time. I even wanted to be a Twitch streamer but having been bullied online before, I had reservations. Then I read your article. My passion slowly started returning and I decided it was time to try again. This is the time to be a woman in the gaming industry. I know I have a gift and a passion for gaming, and it would be a shame to waste it when I could be living my dream. So I applied immediately to start school in the fall. I also decided I will start streaming to help raise money for tuition. Thank you for inspiring me to get out of my comfort zone and chase my dreams.

Melody G.
via email

It's not all that surprising that Kim's piece on inspirational women in gaming inspired other women to pursue their dreams, but we still love hearing about it. Thanks for sharing your stories with us!

Where To Begin?

Destiny 2 is an amazing game. The music is amazing. The art is amazing. But you guys had to exclude it from your Top 50 list when in many people's opinions Destiny 2 was the game of the year. How about your 10/10 Zelda? Tons of people are saying that they've beat Ganon a bunch of times and it's way too short. Destiny 2 has everything a game of the year needs: It has a campaign, it has online multiplayer, it has awesome raids, strikes, and other fun end-game activities. And don't even get me started on no replay value – it has online multiplayer! Your 10/10 Overwatch had nothing but online multiplayer, yet it got game of the year!

Jake DeBoever Jr.
via email

We're not sure what alternate-universe version of Game Informer you're reading, but our Top 50 Games of 2017 list – which came out six months ago – did indeed include Destiny 2. We've also never accused the game of having no replay value; if you couldn't tell from this month's cover, we're still kind of big fans…

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

Battle Royale Rebuttal

I think the formula that created the phenomenon of Call of Duty is finally starting to show its age. There is only so much they can do with their run-and-gun gameplay. I am surprised it lasted this long. It's getting stale and way, way overdone. I know Black Ops 4 will still sell, but I just think it's time to go back to the drawing board. Take a three-year break, get everyone together to a brainstorm a single game, and then reboot it when they're ready. Maybe it's just me, but I feel like it's time for a major change, and battle royale isn't going to cut it.

Travis Daken
via email

It's easy to be skeptical about Call of Duty jumping on the battle-royale bandwagon, but introducing a massive open-world environment and land, sea, and air vehicles seems like just the kind of drastic formula shakeup that the series' detractors have been demanding. Doubling – or more accurately tripling – down on its popular co-op Zombies mode also seems like a smart call for Treyarch. If Black Ops 4 doesn't win you over, that's fine – but maybe we should wait until we actually see the new mode before declaring it not good enough?

What's In A Name?

I'm pretty sure you left off one of the most iconic zombie-but-not-a-zombie enemies from your Game Over quiz (Don't Say The Z-Word, issue 302). How can you forget The Last of Us?! They have five stages of infection, but are often called by their most memorable name: Clickers! You don't need a Clicker-bait title to know that was a rather obvious omission!

Josiah Balson
via email

I quite enjoyed last issue, but I noticed that one of the zombie choices in the Z-Word quiz was "Guardians." Then I looked at the answers and I saw that it matched up with Destiny. I was thoroughly confused because I'm a big Destiny 2 player and it was strange to see that in there. I hope the G.I. staff doesn't hate the Destiny franchise that much. Or is there a completely different game called Destiny with zombies that are called "Guardians?"

Elijah Alexander
via email

We love The Last of Us as much as the next zombie-apocalypse survivor, but as you inferred, "Clicker" is a slang term that merely applies to a subset of the game's enemies. The official zombie-alternative name in The Last of Us is "the Infected," which Left 4 Dead already had dibs on. As for Destiny's Guardians: They are slain warriors who rise from the dead and only make grunting sounds – how is that not a zombie? Also, why do people keep assuming we hate Destiny?

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Why do your magazines smell so good?"

We pay extra for the good-smelling paper.

"Hey can you cover Resident Evil 2 Remake soon?"

Now that someone finally asked about it we can – jump to page 54!

"Why do you put so many Nintendo articles and stuff in your magazine?"

Is this a trick question? Because it feels like a trick question…

Question Of The Month:

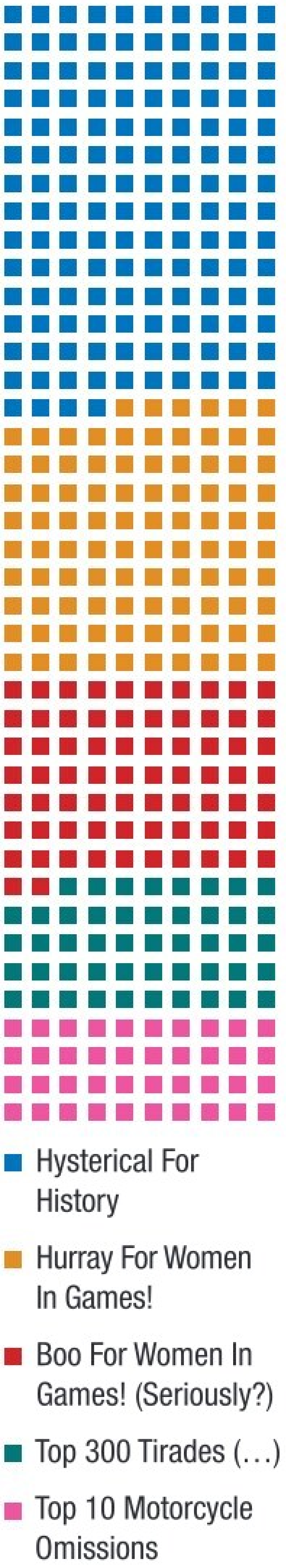
What's the most underrated game of 2018? Now's your chance to give it some love!

gi spy

(Left) Composer Grant Kirkhope, TT Games' Arthur Parsons, and IO Interactive's Jacob Mikkelsen were just a few of the guests on The G.I. Show this E3, so watch go watch those episodes! **(Right)** Also on the show: Jackbox Games' Allard Laban and Mike Builder, Twisted Pixel's Josh Bear, Oculus VP Jason Rubin, and Twisted Pixel's Bill Muehl.

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

On Your Mind



Hurray For History!

In issue 302, we asked readers what historical era they'd like to see explored in a video game. Note to developers: Steal these ideas!

I would love to see a game based around the Prohibition era of the 1920s. I feel like that era holds a lot of potential for a massive open-world adventure, a well-developed story, and fantastic gameplay and strategy. Ideally this game would probably be based around a criminal organization, sort of like the Mafia titles.

Jake Yansen

I was recently reading *Undaunted Courage* about the Lewis and Clark expedition and lamenting how that kind of adventuring into the unknown is impossible now that the world has been mapped. Then I realized it still might be possible – in a video game. I would love a game where you play as Lewis preparing for his journey in early 1800s America, and then exploring the unmapped American West – kind of a modern open-world variation on The Oregon Trail games.

Kristen Kouttab

As a future historian, I think the time period that needs to be covered in a video game is the American Civil War. I'm talking a true triple-A title devoted to this time period. Despite its controversy in recent years, people need to know how important this war is. What better way to reach them than through video games?

Dakota Capps

(Left) We're not done yet! Moon Studios' Thomas Mahler, Microsoft's Dan Greenawalt and Ron Burgess, and Remedy's Thomas Puha also stopped by. **(Right)** Brian Shea and Remedy's Sam Lake were all smiles during their meeting at E3. Well, half a smile, at least.

(continued on page 10)

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gallery

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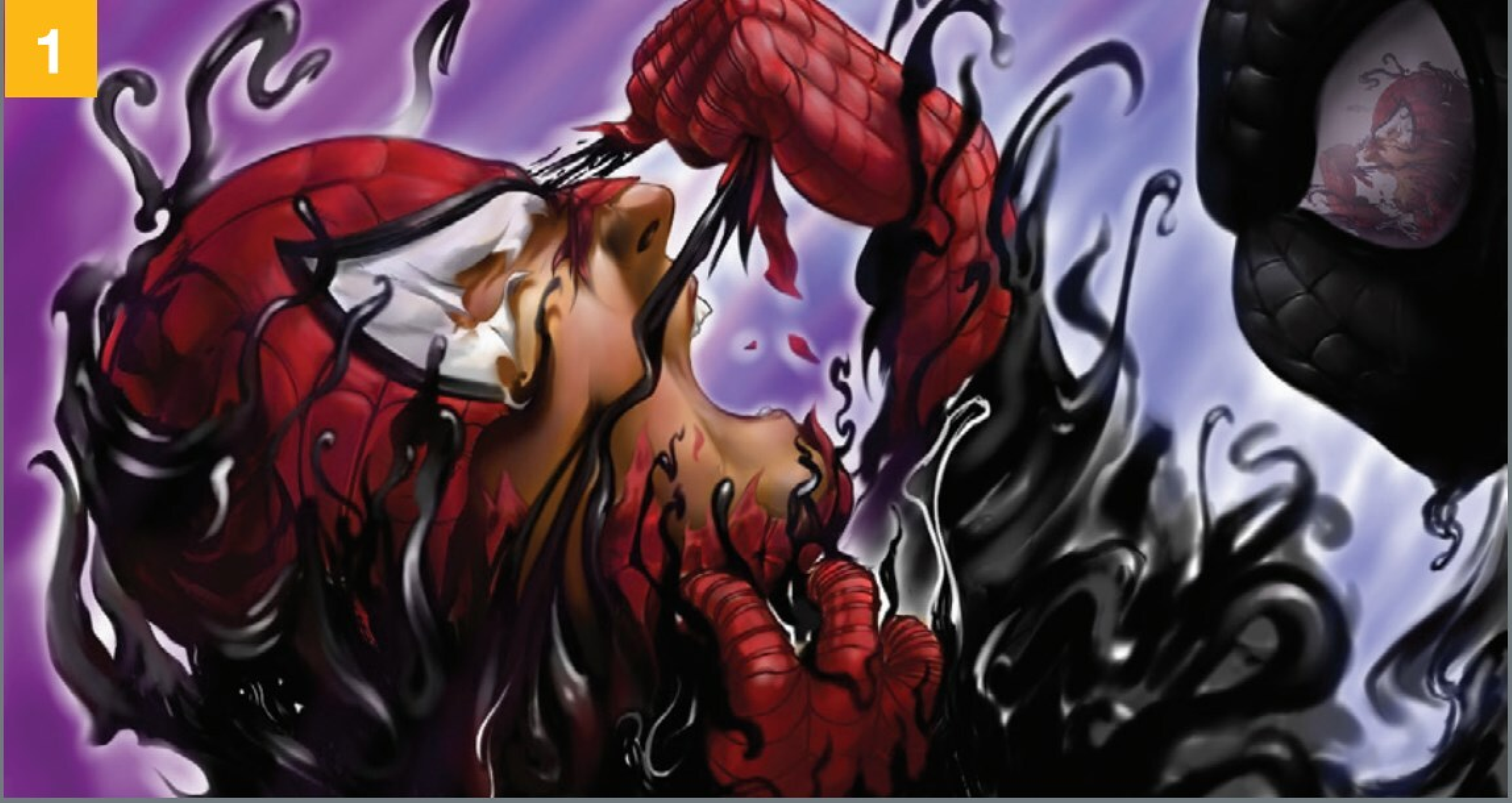

WINNER

1 Jose Perez
We're going to be massively disappointed if this scene doesn't show up in Insomniac's new Spider-Man game…

2 Sara Pinon
We're guessing Sara will be thrilled to see her art in G.I. – but not as thrilled as she'll be to see our Kingdom Hearts III preview on page 59.

3 Kyla Hayes
When you think about it, those squid kids are really just a bunch of graffiti-spraying vandals. Nice example you're setting, Nintendo!

4 Daphne Jordan
We think somebody just earned their Girl Scout badge for Adorable Drawing Featured In An International Magazine!

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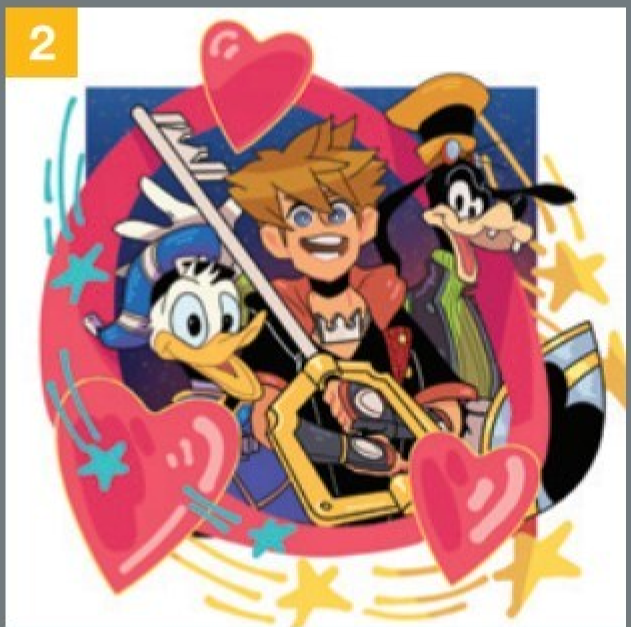

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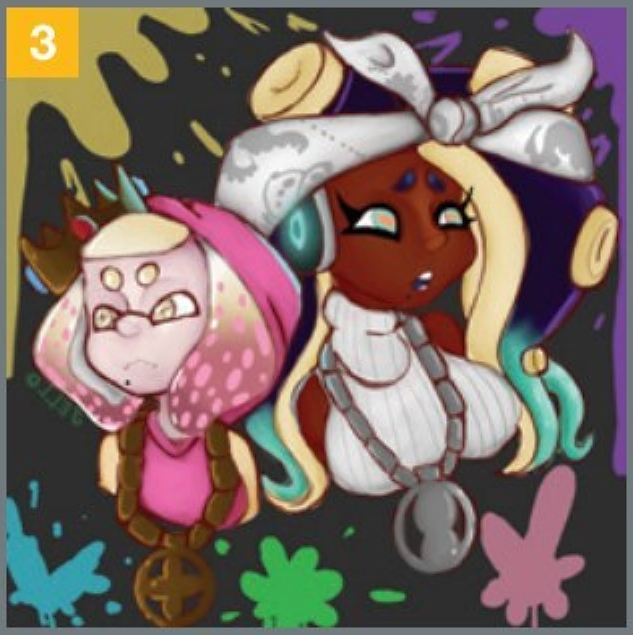

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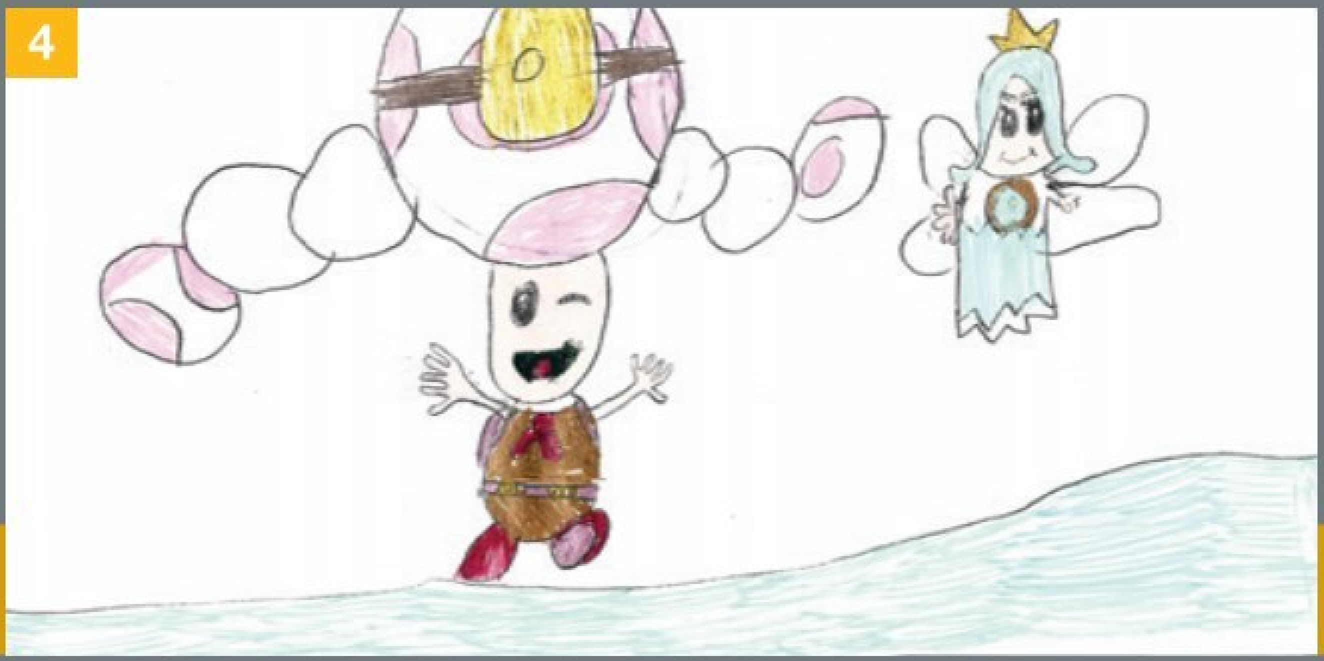

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(Left) Things got real weird when Suda 51 stopped by the G.I. office for our Super Replay of Killer 7. Watch it at Gameinformer.com! **(Right)** What has two thumbs and loves Resident Evil 2? Why, Ben Reeves and Capcom's Yoshiaki Hirabayahi and Tsuyoshi Kanda, of course! Imran is still working on the thumbs…

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E3 2018

Publishers tease the hottest games coming to your consoles in the next year, and offer a tantalizing glimpse at the future of interactive entertainment

The annual Electronic Entertainment Expo is usually the biggest event of the year for new game reveals. But this year, the weeks leading up to the show gave us more surprises than the actual show thanks to planned announcements and unplanned leaks.

Before we even landed in Los Angeles, we already knew about the existence of promising new games like Rage 2, Assassin's Creed Odyssey, Forza Horizon 4, and Gears 5 – the majority of which showed up on a Walmart Canada preorder listing. Other games like Battlefield V and Pokémon: Let's Go Pikachu got out ahead of the blitz with standalone reveal events.

The world's enthusiasm was hardly dampened by the spoiled surprises. More than 69,000 people attended E3 2018, the second consecutive year the show was open to the public. This time the conference hall was more prepared for the onslaught of gamers, as certain hours were reserved for industry insiders only, and most booths were designed to handle large masses of people once the floodgates opened.

Attendees had a lot to look forward to thanks to an inarguably strong game lineup. Longtime franchises like Smash Bros., Tomb Raider, and Resident Evil all showed impressive new demos, and we also got a larger dose of new game properties than is typical at this point in the console cycle. Cyberpunk 2077, Ghost of Tsushima, Control, and Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice all piqued our interest with their beautifully realized settings and intriguing gameplay.

While those last four titles are slated for next year, E3 2018 also teased the more distant future of the medium. Bethesda unloaded nearly every bullet in its clip by announcing The Elder Scrolls VI, Doom Eternal, and a new IP called Starfield being developed by Todd Howard's talented team at Bethesda Game Studios. The slow growth of virtual reality technology relegated it to the sidelines, and publishers like Ubisoft, EA, and Microsoft instead touted streaming services that let you play games anywhere on any device. Xbox head Phil Spencer even briefly mentioned that Microsoft engineers are working on the next Xbox. Most everyone already assumed that was the case, but it's exciting to hear nonetheless.

E3 2018's blend of the near and distant futures left us excited about the state of interactive entertainment. Read on to get a comprehensive overview of the week-long event.

Microsoft

Report Card

Building for the future

First-party software support for PlayStation 4 and Switch have been extraordinary as of late, leading Xbox One fans to wonder when an exclusive top-tier title like God of War or The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild will release on their favorite console. Microsoft's E3 2018 press conference made this concern a priority, as significant exclusive games were announced, and building blocks to expand first- and third-party efforts were put into place.

by Andrew Reiner

The conference kicked off with a familiar green-colored bang: Shots of lush fields and forests filled with wildlife gave way to the return of Master Chief in a new game called Halo Infinite. Developed by 343 Industries and running on the developer's new Slipspace Engine, we were treated to glimpses of what appears to be a legitimate open-world Halo experience. This reveal became the footprint for almost every significant reveal made by Microsoft: early in development with no release date in sight.

Xbox head Phil Spencer followed up this announcement with the conference's agenda to bombard viewers with footage of 50 games, 18 of which would have some form of Xbox One exclusivity. This lengthy showcase of games was excellently orchestrated, blending a wealth of games that have never been seen before with new footage of titles that have graced Microsoft's stage in previous years.

One of those games was Ori and the Will of the Wisps. This series is quietly becoming one of Microsoft's most notable exclusives, and the footage shown for this sequel cemented that belief. Ori looks stunning, and the exploratory platforming looks to build on the original game in significant ways.

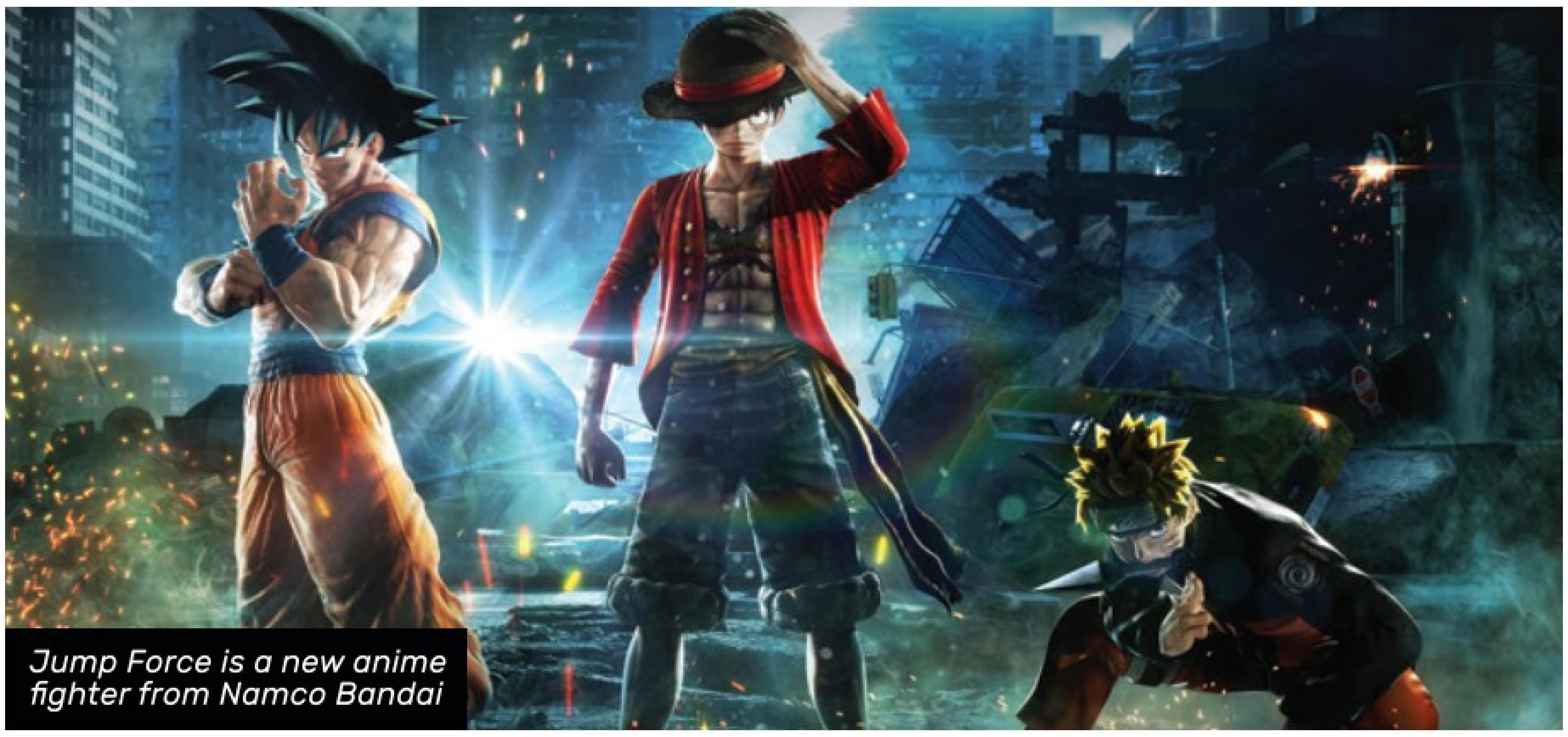
We were then given our first look at From Software's new intellectual property, Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice, a brutally difficult action-adventure game set in Japan's late 16th-century Sengoku period. Sekiro was originally teased at last year's Game Awards without a name, leading many to believe it would be Bloodborne 2, a PlayStation 4 exclusive, yet here it was on Xbox's stage for its official unveiling. Sekiro will release on numerous platforms, but its appearance here was significant, showing Microsoft went all in to woo third-party publishers to unveil their titles on its stage instead of Sony's.

That goal was accomplished. The trailers pounded out excitement, showing us that the next couple of years of gaming are going to be filled with a wide variety of extraordinary experiences to lose ourselves in. Many came from third parties. We were treated to our first glimpses of Devil May Cry 5 and the anime fighter Jump Force, which blends Dragon Ball with Naruto and more. Square Enix also debuted Just Cause 4 and a new world from Kingdom Hearts III, a series that has never been on an Xbox console before.

On the first-party front, no announcement topped the return of Halo, but Microsoft did shock people by revealing three new Gears of War titles are in the works. The first of these titles, Gears Pop!, drew an audible groan from the crowd that was clearly waiting to see a lancer cut into a locust with 4K-enhanced blood spatter. Instead they saw a cute, toy-based recreation of one of Microsoft's most beloved series being developed for iOS and Android platforms. The second game, the PC-exclusive Gears Tactics, didn't fare much better.

Microsoft has a somewhat dark history of expanding its successful brands. Some of Halo's offshoots were warmly embraced, but it can be argued that Microsoft's attempt to turn Fable into every kind of game destroyed that series. Gears of War exploring XCOM territory could work, but Microsoft clearly didn't want that game to test the waters on its own. The third game was the one people wanted to see.

Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice could be From Software's most challenging game yet


Jump Force is a new anime fighter from Namco Bandai

Gears of War 5 is a direct continuation that follows Kait Diaz and a now bearded J.D. Fenix in a globetrotting adventure that explores Kait's connection to the Swarm. No release timeframe other than 2019 was given.

Microsoft's lineup included a first look at one of the few exclusives releasing in 2018, Forza Horizon 4, which takes races to Great Britain this October, another look at Crackdown 3, now delayed until February 2019, and new DLC for Sea of Thieves and Cuphead. Microsoft also teased the return of Battletoads, but only showed a logo.

Microsoft tried to hype up its Game Pass program, which includes its forthcoming first-party titles, and the additions of a few third-party games like Fallout 4 and The Division, but botched the messaging for its subscription program with the announcement of the horribly named FastStart, an update that will allow players to enter games twice as fast as before. Applying a name to something like increased boot-up speeds is strange, and signals it may not be automatic for all Game Pass titles. It just led to confusion.

The biggest reveal from Microsoft this year wasn't a game, but the acquisition of four well-known game development studios: Playground Games (Forza Horizon), Ninja Theory (DmC: Devil May Cry, Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice), Undead Labs (State of Decay), and Compulsion Games (We Happy Few). Microsoft also announced the creation of a new Santa Monica-based development studio called The Initiative led by former Crystal Dynamics head Darrell Gallagher. This new developer will focus on triple-A experiences for the Xbox brand.

Microsoft hammered home the point that Xbox is here to stay. Spencer briefly discussed the company's plans for a new game streaming service that works on any device, and even teased the Xbox One successor. "The same team that delivered unprecedented performance with Xbox One X is deep into architecting the next Xbox consoles, where we will once again deliver on our commitment to set the benchmark for console gaming," he said.

For the second year in a row, Microsoft's show concluded with a look at a third-party title that will also be on PlayStation 4 and PC. This spot is usually where the console exclusives sit, but Microsoft recognized CD Projekt Red's Cyberpunk 2077 (see page 45) was the most exciting game in the showcase. This trailer lived up to its positioning and was easily the most talked about and anticipated game following the entertaining conference. ◆

Final Grade

Microsoft didn't do much to increase the outlook for Xbox One in 2018, but successfully delivered the message that first-party efforts should be better in the years ahead. Adding five studios to its developer portfolio is a huge plus for Microsoft. The tease that the future of Halo may be different was also successful, instilling hope to a frustrated fan base. After a year of pounding its chest that Xbox One X would be the most powerful console out there, Microsoft barely mentioned its expensive hardware at the show, almost treating it like an afterthought. E3 as a whole was a success for Microsoft in terms of building upon its brand, and putting the pieces in place to once again compete with Sony and Nintendo.

B

Sony
Report Card

A subdued spectacle

When Sony Interactive Entertainment president and CEO Shawn Layden dampened expectations for his own company's E3 press conference before it happened, nobody was really sure what we were going to see. Was it just a trick to lull the world before blindsiding it with some huge news, or was it to manage our excitement for what was otherwise going to be a ho-hum affair? The truth turned out to be somewhere in the middle.

by Matthew Kato

Although Sony did not reveal anything truly shocking, keeping an even keel with its E3 press conference was probably a strategic move. Like in previous E3s during the PlayStation 4 era, Sony let the games coming to the system speak for themselves, reinforcing the truth that the PS4 is the leading home console on the market largely thanks to the excellent support it receives from first- and third-party games.

Sony may be leading this generation, but the E3 press conference itself was less than commanding. Although it started with a gripping new trailer for The Last of Us Part II that was as violent as it was tender, afterward there was an intermission of sorts for the press conference as attendees physically switched venues and the cameras filled the time with Sony emcees talking to Layden.

Amazingly, 32 minutes after it had started and halfway through its hour-plus runtime, Sony's E3 press conference managed to only show off one first-party title, two third-party trailers, a montage sequence, and two musical performances. It took that long to get to the second of what Layden referred to as the evening's "big pillar games" – Sucker Punch Productions' Ghost of Tsushima.

Thankfully, the wait was worth it, as the in-game footage was breathtakingly beautiful, its color palette, lighting, and weather effects conveying the calm before the Mongol storm. Like The Last of Us Part II before it, Ghost of

Apparently you play an interstellar delivery man in Death Stranding

The Last of Us Part II's new trailer shows Ellie in both brutal and peaceful states

Ghost of Tsushima surprised with its breathtaking beauty

Tsushima wowed the crowd with gameplay that rendered the distinction of what is or isn't a cutscene to a quibble.

This was a feature of the press conference's four big titles – The Last of Us Part II, Ghost of Tsushima, Death Stranding, and Spider-Man – the spectacle of what was shown on the big screen hinted at actual gameplay possibilities. When Layden talked about this year's press conferences being more about a deep dive with select titles, we expected developers from the games' studios to come onstage and talk and demo us through what we were seeing, but that never happened. Instead, gameplay was implied. Thankfully, Spider-Man was available for the public to play on the show floor and we saw the gameplay of the Ghost of Tsushima demo behind closed doors.

From here the press conference hit its stride and followed a more usual cadence. Nobody was quite sure what to make of the debut of Remedy's new title, Control, but the mystery drove intrigue. Resident Evil 2's unveiling produced a raucous cheer from the crowd.

Trailers for Trover Saves the Universe, a VR platformer from *Rick and Morty* showrunner Justin Roiland, and Kingdom Hearts III (featuring *Pirates of the Caribbean*) cleansed the palette, as did interludes showing off Media Molecules' Dreams. The free-form creation game is still a bit of a mystery to most, but apparently you can create musical performances similar to what was shown in snippets between some of the night's games.

Kojima Production's Death Stranding and Insomniac's Spider-Man were showcased almost back to back, the latter ending the night and providing the most definitive example of its gameplay, along with appearances from nemeses Electro, Rhino, Scorpion, Vulture, and Mister Negative.

In the end, Sony's E3 press conference was somewhat unusual, not only in its format, but its content. There were no developers on stage, no touts of exclusive third-party content, and no surprise pronouncements. And yet – despite the ongoing controversy surrounding Sony's refusal to allow cross-platform play for titles like Fortnite unlike its competitors – the company showed that the PS4's future is brighter than it's ever been.

Final Grade

The future of the PS4 is exciting, but Sony's delivery of that message lacked some details. As enthused as we are for its games, only one of the big four titles it showed off at E3 – Spider-Man – has a release date. Sony was similarly vague around PSVR and the PlayStation Pro. The fact that PSVR title Déraciné, created by Souls series creator Hidetaka Miyazaki, was announced after the Sony press conference is perhaps indicative of the peripheral's standing.

Instead, Sony used E3 to answer questions about each of the four promising exclusives. Nobody had previously seen The Last of Us Part II or Ghost of Tsushima in action. Now we have, and they look great. There were questions about what kind of gameplay experiences we'd have around Spider-Man and Death Stranding, and now we have a better idea (albeit more for the former than the latter).

Awkward pacing of the showcase aside, you can't deny the fact that Sony's first-party lineup is impressive, or the truth that the vast majority of games shown at the Microsoft press conference will also be on the PS4. In a sense, they almost had two press conferences.

B+

Nintendo

Report Card

Hope you like Smash Bros.

After 2016 centered primarily on Zelda and 2017 dedicated most of the stage to Mario, Nintendo chose to focus its 2018 E3 on the next step for its popular Super Smash Bros. fighting series. As beloved as the franchise is, Breath of the Wild and Odyssey are tough acts to follow. Smash Bros. fans learned all they could possibly want about the series' first appearance on Switch, but just about everything else felt shallow or wasn't present at all.

by Kyle Hilliard

Nintendo kicked off its now-annual pre-recorded presentation with a new game called Daemon X Machina. The game is being developed by Marvelous, and the team behind it includes Armored Core veterans. The mech shooter has an interesting cel-shaded style, but did little to make a splash in the crowded announcements and reveals of E3 or set itself apart from comparable games.

The reveal of Xenoblade Chronicles 2's Torna the Golden County DLC was a treat for those who saw the massive game to its conclusion. It fills in an important story gap missing from the main game and confirms Nintendo's commitment to post-game content for its big titles (like its Breath of the Wild DLC).

Pokémon: Let's Go, Pikachu and Eevee is an interesting game, but it was revealed a week prior to E3, so it wasn't a surprise. We saw a little bit of new gameplay and learned Mew will be included with the Poké Ball Plus accessory, but otherwise Reggie Fils-Aime's appearance to talk about the game was just a confirmation that it is still coming out in November.

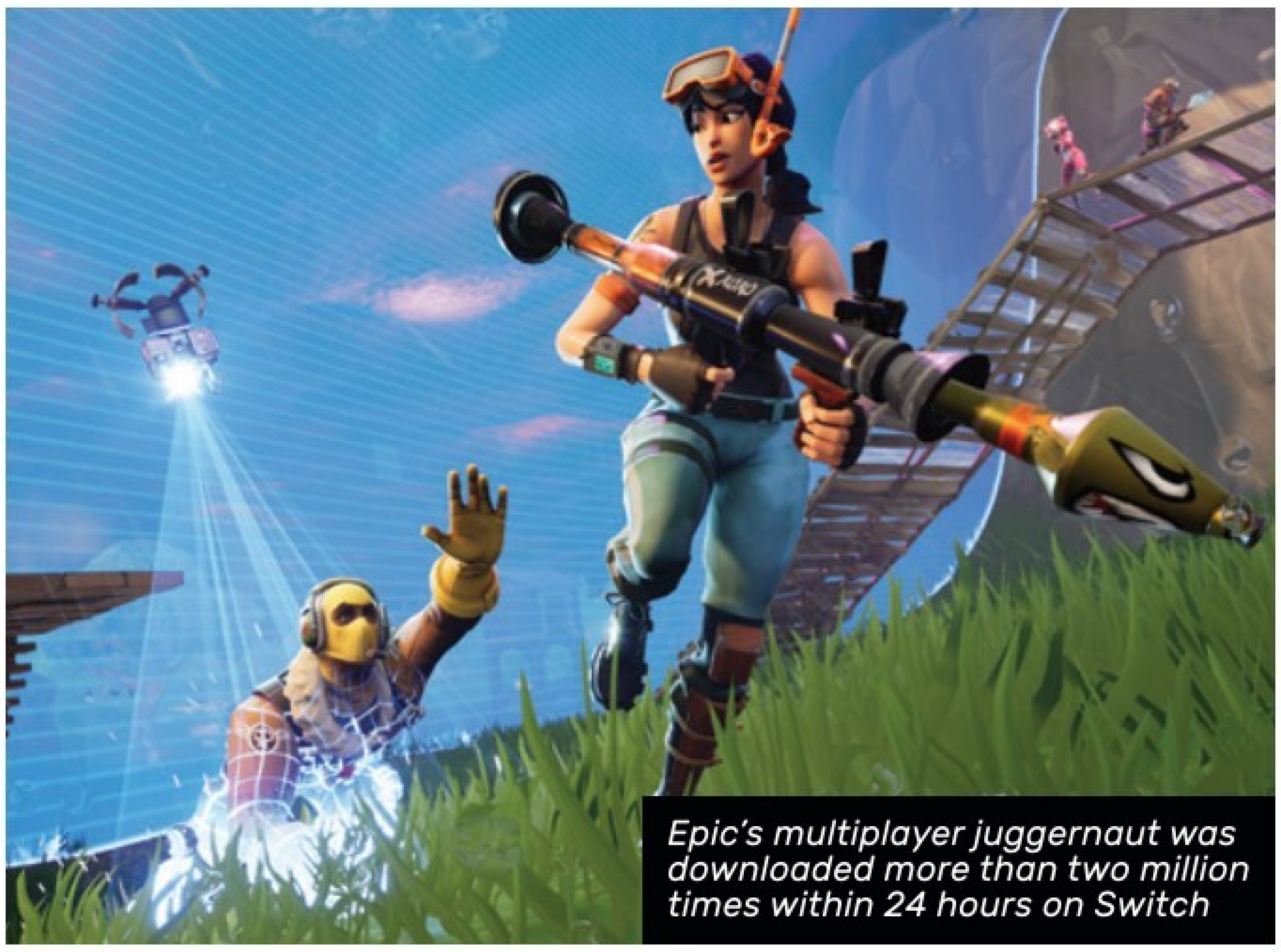
Mario Party's Switch debut showed the console being used in some novel ways, like lining up to two Switch screens to create an extended playfield for a tank-combat minigame. This is still Mario Party, though, and even adding the prefix "Super" to the front won't change that. We know what to expect.

Next to Super Smash Bros. Ultimate, Fire Emblem: Three Houses was the most exciting game to appear in Nintendo's presentation. The trailer for this new Switch title showcased updated gameplay mechanics, visuals, and explorable environments, which is a rarity in Fire Emblem.

Fortnite's jump to the Switch was leaked before the show, but it didn't make the news any less exciting. Alongside the official confirmation came the surprise that Fortnite would be available to download shortly after the presentation ended. The Switch version of the game was downloaded more than two million times in 24 hours. It's not as technically proficient as its PlayStation 4, Xbox One, and PC counterparts, but having a mobile version of the game that's not played with a touchscreen is awesome.

One frustrating wrinkle emerged from Fortnite's release on Switch, however. Users who already played the game on PlayStation 4 and connected their Epic accounts to their PSN account were required to create a new, separate account on Switch in order to play on the new platform. Additionally, players who start on Switch cannot move their account over to PlayStation 4. Sony's stubborn adherence to keeping its player base centralized on PlayStation 4 was understandably frustrating to those who enjoy cross-platform play under one profile, and Sony signaled no intention to address the problem now or in the future. In a statement to the BBC, Sony thoughtfully reminded everyone that Fortnite on PlayStation 4 already offers crossplay with PC, Mac, iOS, and Android devices, so quit complaining. I'm paraphrasing, but you get the idea.

Nintendo offered a handful of quick third-party announcements, including Dragon Ball FighterZ, Overcooked 2, and Wasteland 2. Like Fortnite, ports for Hollow Knight and Paladins were made available immediately.

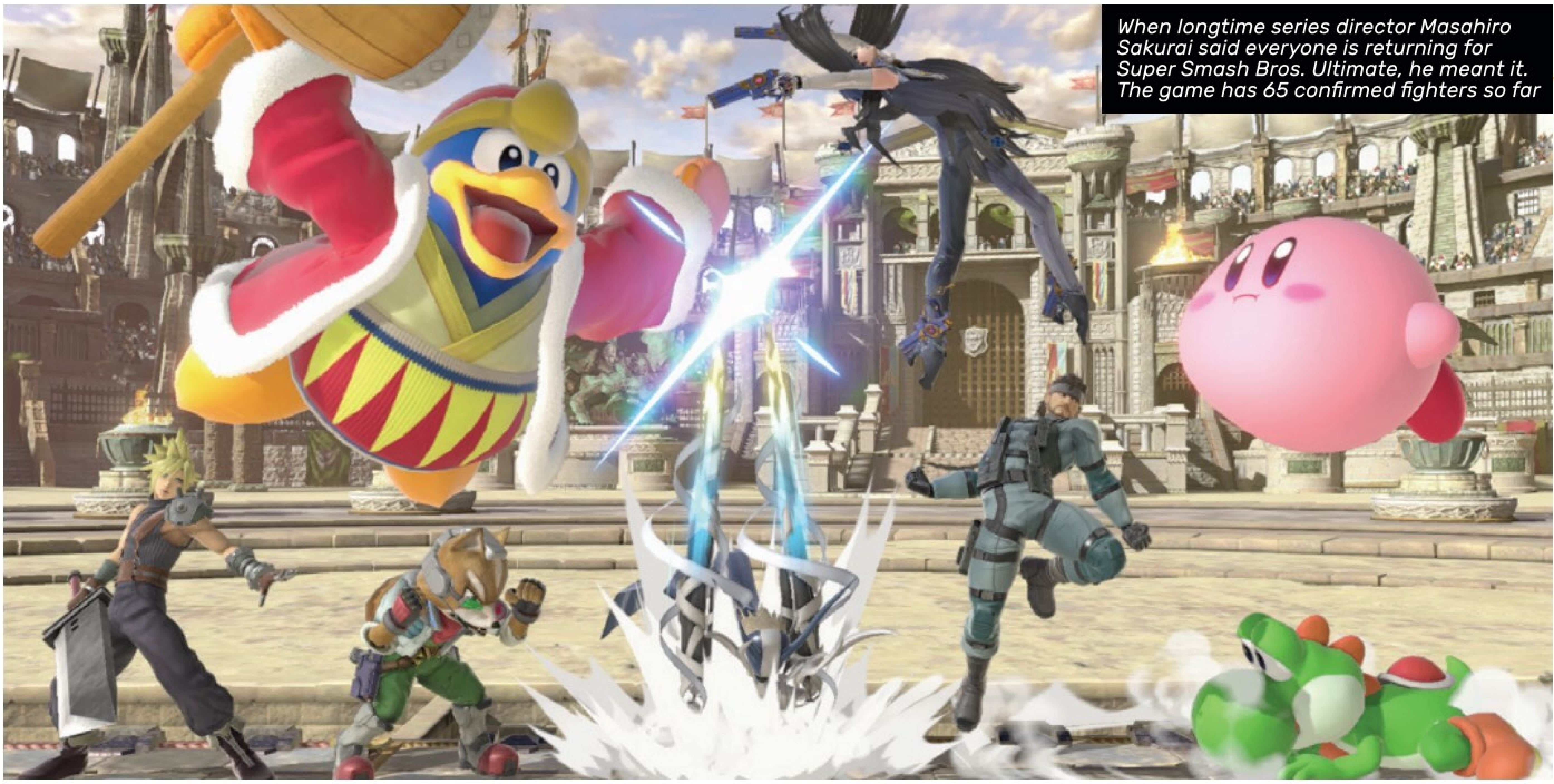


Epic's multiplayer juggernaut was downloaded more than two million times within 24 hours on Switch

Ubisoft + Star Fox + Donkey Kong

Nintendo may still lack strong support from major North American publishers like EA and Activision, but Ubisoft is firmly in Nintendo's camp. The French publisher proved it by spending almost as much time on Nintendo characters as it did its own games during its E3 press conference. Though it was previously announced, Ubisoft set aside a large portion of the show to celebrate the upcoming Donkey Kong DLC for Mario + Rabbids Kingdom Battle with an extended concert segment helmed by the game's composer, Grant Kirkhope.

Shigeru Miyamoto didn't appear in Nintendo's E3 direct presentation, but he was in attendance during Ubisoft's presser to help unveil the inclusion of Star Fox in Ubisoft's space shooter, Starlink: Battle for Atlas. Fox McCloud and his Arwing ship will be playable in the Switch version of the game, and Ubisoft is even producing Arwing and Fox McCloud figures for its toys-to life-mechanics, which Miyamoto proudly showed off on Ubisoft's stage.



When longtime series director Masahiro Sakurai said everyone is returning for Super Smash Bros. Ultimate, he meant it. The game has 65 confirmed fighters so far

The slew of announcements included a new Octopath Traveler demo, and the unveiling of Killer Queen Black. Killer Queen is a popular arcade-exclusive multiplayer game (a rarity in North America), and it is finally making its home debut on Switch. Big games from major North American publishers like EA and Activision are still conspicuously absent, and while we would like to play games like Madden and Overwatch on the Switch at some point, we're happy the console's non-Nintendo library continues to grow at a steady rate.

Nintendo spent the rest of the Spotlight offering exhaustive details about Super Smash Bros. Ultimate, which was great for the super fans, but probably sounded like a foreign language to others as the series' longtime director, Masahiro Sakurai, detailed updated mechanics like directional air drops and perfect shield counters.

Super Smash Bros. Ultimate's roster contains every fighter who has ever been featured in Super Smash Bros., even the odd fits. For example, Toon Link was added to Super Smash Bros. Brawl to replace Young Link from Melee. The characters are basically the same, but Toon Link is a much more visually distinct version of the Hero of Time. For Ultimate, though, both characters are playable. Crossover heroes like Metal Gear's Snake, Final Fantasy's Cloud, and Bayonetta all made the roster, and there are even a few new fighters. Nintendo revealed Inkling from Splatoon during the original game reveal, but we also learned Daisy will be playable, though she is an "echo" of Peach, sharing the same moveset. The biggest roster announcement was Ridley, the long-requested antagonist of Metroid heroine Samus, who has more in common visually with a Xenomorph than any Nintendo character. ◆

Final Grade

Perhaps the biggest issue with Nintendo's E3 presence was its lack of surprises. Whether they were spoiled beforehand, as was the case with Fortnite, or previously announced, like Super Smash Bros., there simply wasn't anything that blew us away. Super Smash Bros. Ultimate is undeniably exciting. Including every fighter ever, plus a few rookies, is supremely ambitious, but it is still just more Smash Bros. Metroid Prime 4 and Bayonetta 3 were conspicuously absent, Animal Crossing was a no-show, and we're still curious how Nintendo plans on bringing classic games to the Switch.

C

The Most Fascinating

TRAILERS

OF E3 2018

From triple-A sequels to innovative indies, this year's E3 was chock full of exciting games to play. While you'll learn all about those titles in our E3 Hot 50, there were also some big-name announcements and reveals that only appeared in video form. Here are the best and brightest of E3's nonplayable games.

by Jeff Marchiafava

FALLOUT 76

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PC

Bethesda gave Fallout 76 the red-carpet treatment at its E3 2018 press conference with a lengthy presentation helmed by series director Todd Howard. Howard shared a number of enticing tidbits for fans, including the news that Fallout 76 takes place in West Virginia just 25 years after the bombs dropped – making it the first chronological entry in the series. The biggest piece of info, however, is that Fallout 76 is an entirely online multiplayer game.

Amidst pre-recorded video clips of players exploring the wasteland and engaging in combat together, Howard quickly pointed out that the entirety of Fallout 76 can still be played solo, and that you won't constantly be bumping into other human survivors. "You'll be in the world with dozens, not hundreds and not thousands, of players," Howard says. "It's the apocalypse, not an amusement park, okay?"

In addition to playing with your friends whenever you want, Fallout 76 offers a host of new enemy types based on West Virginian folklore, more in-depth building mechanics (including the option to create outposts wherever you want), and even the ability to nuke entire areas off the map. Bethesda's Creation engine has also gotten an upgrade, with all-new rendering, lighting, and landscape tools, which sport 16 times the level of visual detail of previous games. The best part? Players won't have to wait long to return to the wasteland. Fallout 76 launches on November 14.

DEATH STRANDING

Platform: PS4

Hideo Kojima's surreal PS4 exclusive got a little more concrete this E3, even if we still don't know what the heck is going on. The eight-minute trailer finally offers some details about the character played by actor Norman Reedus. His name is Sam Porter Bridges, and he works as some kind of futuristic delivery man. The extended video shows Bridges lugging a variety of cargo containers across gorgeous open-world vistas, while dealing with tribulations like a wince-inducing foot injury and being swept down river by a powerful current.

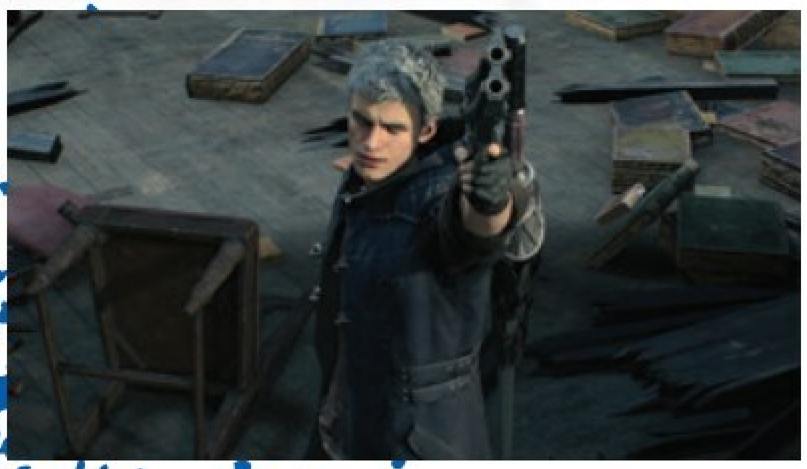
Stealth gameplay is also highlighted; the light peripheral on Bridges' suit is able to temporarily illuminate the strange shadow beings introduced in Death Stranding's previous trailers, allowing him to sneak by – at least until they spot him and drag our protagonist down into a tar-like pit toward the end of the trailer.

As we've come to expect, the video raises a whole new set of questions as well, including the identity of a mysterious blonde woman who shows up on an alien-looking beach full of dead whales. Is she someone from Bridges' past? Or a hallucination? We don't expect to find out the answers anytime soon, but our latest glimpse of Death Stranding left us intrigued nonetheless.

DEVIL MAY CRY 5

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PC

Capcom's appropriately manic trailer for Devil May Cry 5 featured plenty of outrageous characters (including a revamped Nero sporting a robotic arm and his iconic sword, Red Queen), towering enemy bosses, and slow-motion combat. Capcom also revealed that Nero can acquire and swap between a variety of other prosthetic arms, each of which offer the sassy demon hunter unique combat abilities. Capcom is calling Devil May Cry 5 the "true sequel to Devil May Cry 4," and says it features three playable characters. Expect to see and hear more about it at Gamescom.



GEARS 5

Platform: Xbox One, PC

Microsoft's reveal for the latest – and now abbreviated – title in the Gears of War series started with a heavy emphasis on story. Gears 4 protagonist Kait Diaz has lingering questions about the mysterious necklace bestowed to her by her grandmother, and she's willing to disobey direct orders to find the truth. After setting up the premise, the trailer focuses on what's really important – a gorgeous, 4K montage of Kait and company kicking alien ass. Based on the footage, The Coalition is clearly continuing to push the visual and narrative boundaries of the Gears franchise, which should keep longtime fans happy.

WOLFENSTEIN: YOUNGBLOOD

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PC

MachineGames' gonzo take on Wolfenstein has revitalized the series in recent years, and the developer shows no signs of slowing down. The latest installment is entitled Youngblood, and focuses on B.J. Blazkowicz's twin daughters, Jessica and Sophia, in the '80s. As you might infer from our new protagonists, Youngblood is being designed with co-op play in mind, allowing two players to team up and murder their way through Nazi-controlled Europe together.

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HALO INFINITE

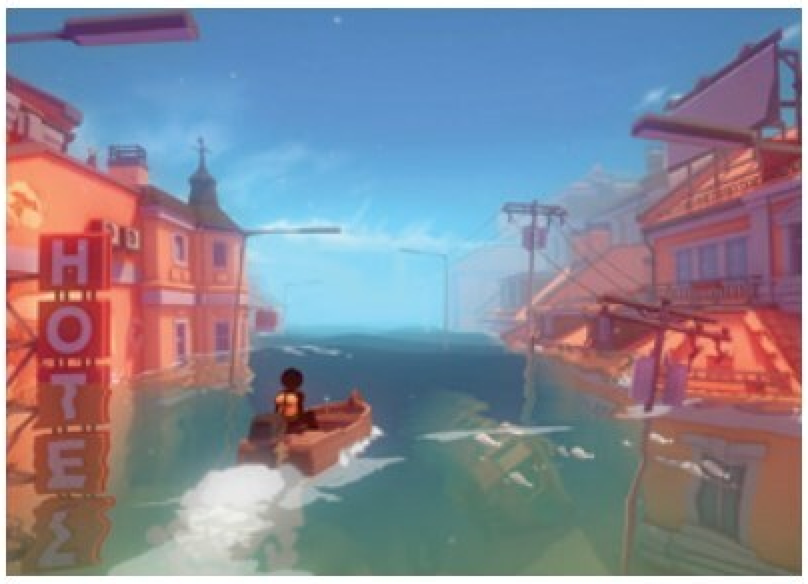
Platform: Xbox One, PC

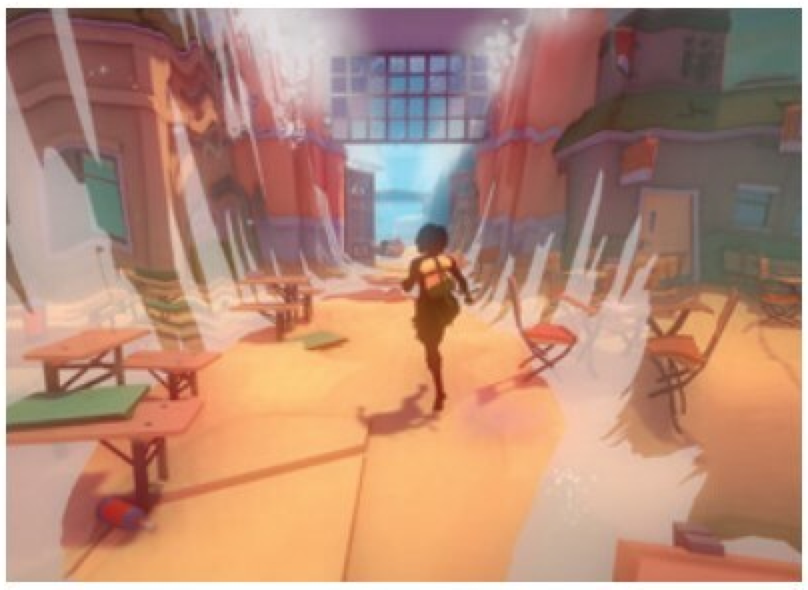
Halo remains Microsoft's most important exclusive, so the publisher wasn't going to let E3 go by without a tease of the next installment. The trailer for Halo Infinite was light on details, instead showing off the power of the Slipstream engine with a variety of landscapes and locales before revealing a waist-high shot of Master Chief holding his iconic helmet. The trailer also included a brief snippet of a Warthog driving across a valley, before revealing the cast is on another ring world. Perhaps this is Microsoft's way of conveying that 343 is going back to the basics of what made the series so popular in the first place?

SEA OF SOLITUDE

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PC

EA announced Sea of Solitude amongst its blitzkrieg of shooters and sports games, and for some it was the highlight of the publisher's press conference. The trailer shows a young girl named Kay exploring a half-submerged world full of shadowy monsters. The only problem? Kay has also turned into a monster, and it's up to players to discover why.





STARFIELD

Platform: TBA

The first of two rapid-fire reveals from Bethesda Game Studios, Starfield is a brand-new sci-fi RPG series. That's literally all we know at this point – the teaser was merely an image of a planet and the logo, but "No Man's Skyrim" is enough to have us drooling about the possibilities.

THE ELDER SCROLLS VI

Platform: TBA

Bethesda saved its biggest reveal for last: another all-too-short teaser for the impossibly anticipated next entry in the Elder Scrolls series. The short flyover of an unnamed countryside has some internet sleuths deducing that the game will be set in High Rock, Hammerfell, or even the entirety of Tamriel. In other words, no one knows – but we can't wait to find out!

DOOM ETERNAL

Platform: TBA

Id Software's reveal of Doom Eternal was short, but it teased everything we want from a sequel to 2016's fantastic reboot. Doom Eternal brings Hell's army to Earth – which, based on the burning skyscrapers and copious amounts of rubble, has seen better days. Doom Eternal features twice as many demons as its predecessor, along with new weapons to shoot them with. Don't worry, though – the trailer confirms that your favorite double-barreled shotgun is returning as well. Id Software is planning a full reveal at this year's QuakeCon in August.

SESSION

Platform: Xbox One, PC

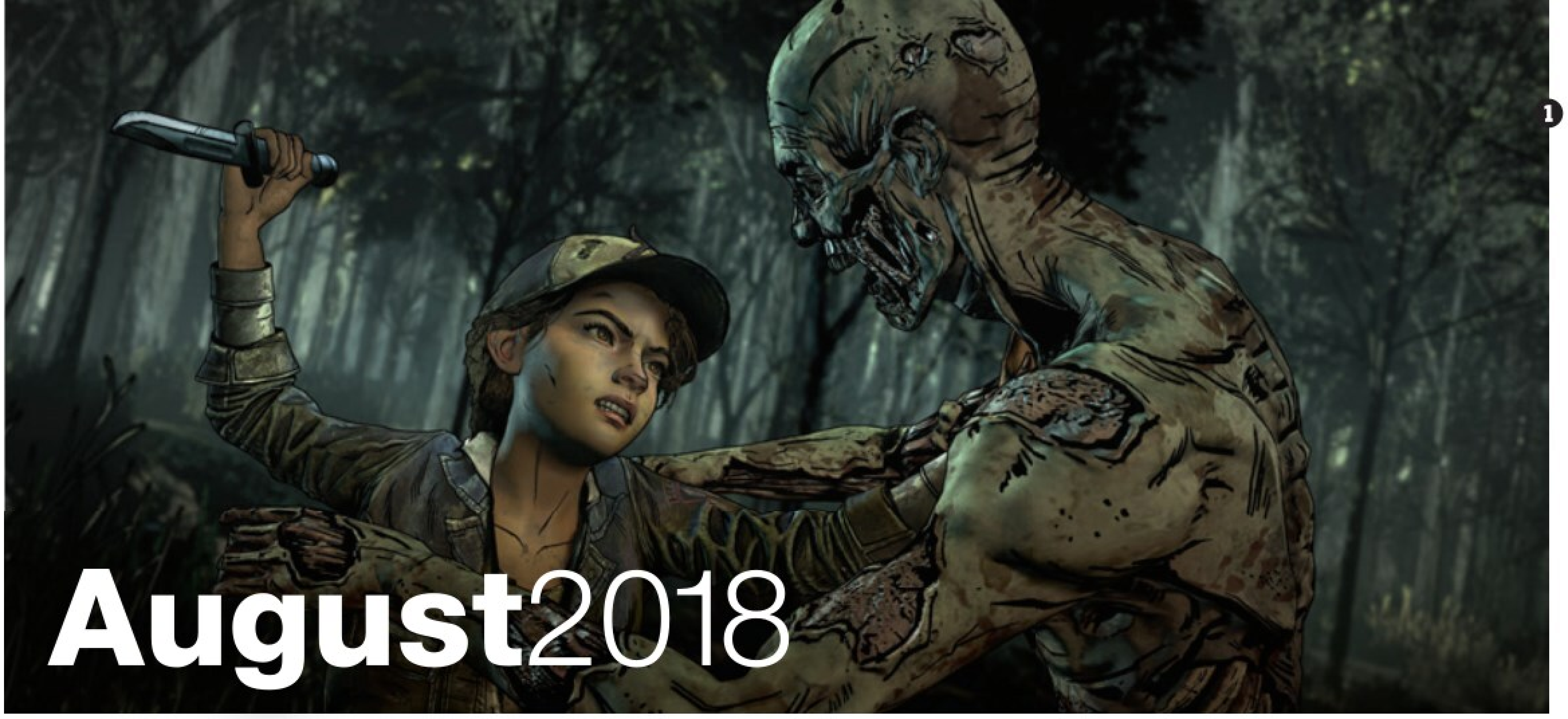
Skate fans have been begging EA for a sequel for years, and this E3 the publisher … didn't deliver yet again. Luckily, Microsoft was ready to pick up the slack, showing off a stylish trailer for Session, a Kickstarter-backed skateboarding sim the publisher has timed exclusivity rights for. Session uses a dual-analog control scheme to simulate the player's individual feet, making it a more in-depth take on the sport. Session kickflips into PC Early Access and Xbox One Game Preview later this year.

FIRE EMBLEM: THREE HOUSES

Platform: Switch

After years of being relegated to underpowered handhelds, Fire Emblem is finally getting another proper console release – and based on the impressive E3 trailer, Intelligent Systems is putting the Switch to good use. Fire Emblem: Three Houses ditches the series' pixelated avatars for full 3D character models and battlefields, and fleshes out the action with dozens of NPCs, making encounters feel more like the large-scale wars they're supposed to be. Players can look forward to tackling the biggest and most visually arresting entry in the Fire Emblem series next spring.

Grassland
Edelgard
Lv 3 HP 29/29
Steel Axe



August2018

GAME RELEASES

Wednesday 01
- Yakuza 0 (PC)

Friday 03
- WarioWare Gold (3DS)

Tuesday 07
- Overcooked 2 (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)

Thursday 09
- Okami HD (Switch)

Friday 10
- Madden NFL 19 (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- We Happy Few (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Tuesday 14
- Death's Gambit (PS4, PC)
- The Walking Dead: The Final Season – Episode 1 (Xbox One, PS4, PC) ❶
- World of Warcraft: Battle of Azeroth (PC)

Friday 24
- F1 2018 (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Tuesday 28
- Little Dragon's Café (PS4, Switch)
- Monster Hunter Generations Ultimate (Switch)
- Pro Evolution Soccer 2018 (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- Yakuza Kiwami 2 (PS4)
- Strange Brigade (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Friday 31
- Divinity: Original Sin 2 (PS4, Xbox One)
- Naruto to Boruto: Shinobi Striker (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

SLENDER MAN
❷

MOVIE & TV PREMIERES

Friday 03
- Christopher Robin (theaters)

Monday 06
- Better Call Saul (AMC)

Wednesday 08
- Hard Knocks: Cleveland Browns (HBO)

Friday 10
- The Meg (theaters)

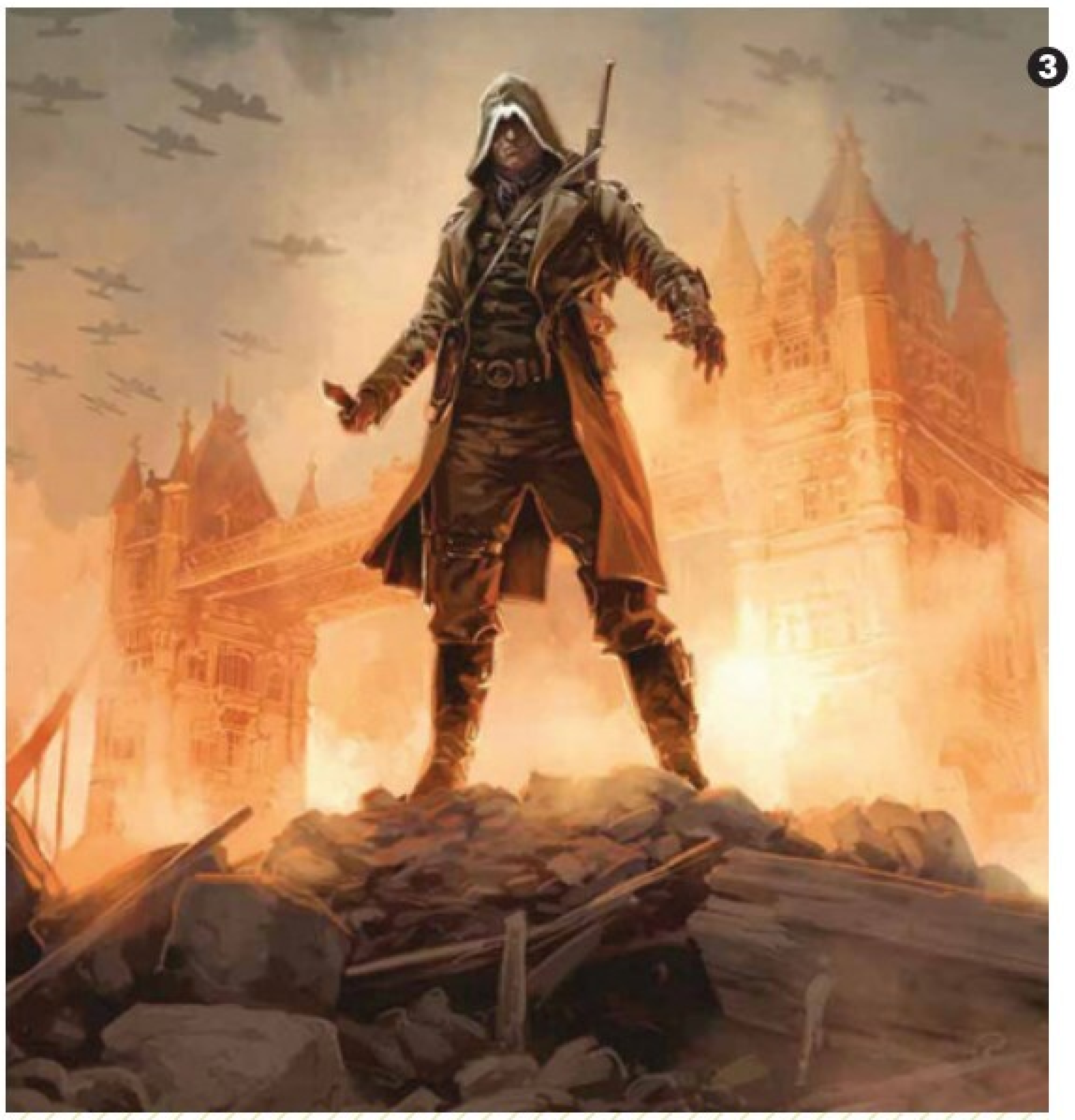
Sunday 12
- Ballers (HBO)
- Fear the Walking Dead (AMC)

Friday 17
- Disenchantment (Netflix)

Monday 20
- MTV Video Music Awards (MTV)

Friday 24
- The Innocents (Netflix)
- Slender Man (theaters) ❷

Friday 31
- Jack Ryan (Amazon)



GAMER CULTURE

Thursday 02
Gen Con
The biggest board game, role-playing, and collectible card gaming show in the country begins today in Indianapolis, Indiana. This four-day show allows you to get your hands on (and often purchase) the latest and greatest in gaming. Tournaments, escape rooms, showcases, and even weddings are on this year's program.

Thusday 09
QuakeCon
Hot on the heels of the announcements of Rage 2, Doom Eternal, and Fallout 76, Bethesda Softworks' annual fan gathering will likely give us a second look at these big games. This year's show brings back panels, but once again hangs its hat on the massive BYOC LAN party and tournaments. QuakeCon runs for four days in Grapevine, Texas.

Wednesday 15
Assassin's Creed: Conspiracies ❸
A new chapter in Ubisoft's long-running game series unfolds in a two-issue comic series called Assassin's Creed: Conspiracies. Set in the thick of World War II, this story follows a new assassin named Eddie Gorm who is hot on the heels of the Templars and their plans to create an atomic bomb.

Wednesday 22
Gamescom
The E3 teaser for Cyberpunk 2077 revealed the game would reappear again at this year's Gamescom expo held in Germany. This massive video game show always delivers plenty of new game reveals, hands-on impressions, and developer insight. Check out GameInformer.com for up-to-the minute reporting on this four-day show.

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AT THE CROSSROADS

Destiny 2: Forsaken revives the hobby, kills its darlings, and charts a course for lost frontiers

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
Online
Multiplayer Shooter

» Publisher
Activision

» Developer
Bungie,
High Moon Studios

» Release
September 4

The Destiny franchise is at an inflection point. In a quandary that has plagued the series since its inception, a constant push and pull draws the game back and forth between competing and often contrary impulses. Ease of entry and accessibility versus long-term depth and complexity; a drive to innovate and evolve versus familiar and well-loved systems; straightforward storytelling and humor versus layered lore and manifold secrets unlockable only to the most faithful players. Burdened but privileged to navigate the space in between are the developers behind the series, who want nothing more than to craft something memorable and magical.

BY MATT MILLER

WHILE THE LIFE OF THE SCI-FI / FANTASY SHOOTER HAS BEEN RIFE WITH UPS AND DOWNS, THE MONTHS SINCE THE LAUNCH OF DESTINY 2 LAST SEPTEMBER HAVE BEEN ESPECIALLY TUMULTUOUS.

After a strong launch that was initially praised by both fans and critics, the months that followed revealed a sequel that was ill-suited to the desires of its most ardent fans; some of the same changes that welcomed new players into the fold also limited replayability and engagement. When it arrives in September, Destiny 2: Forsaken must answer all the accumulated critiques and concerns, and simultaneously serve up something suitably large and novel.

To learn how Bungie and its partner High Moon Studios aims to hit the mark, I sat down for several days with a work-in-progress version of Forsaken. I explored the tethered asteroids of the lawless Reef and launched into the arcane mysteries of the Dreaming City. I blasted aggressive new enemy types with an array of new superpowers. And through both in-game time and hours of conversation with the people building the game, I grokked not only how Destiny is attempting to return to its former glory, but how it aims to exceed those heights.

BREAKING OUT

Destiny 2: Forsaken opens as a story of revenge. While many narrative twists remain unspoiled, the developers have made no secret of the event that kicks everything off. The Hunter Vanguard and wisecracking comedian of the series, Cayde-6, has been murdered, and you've taken up the dirty job of avenging the injustice. "The tone that we're going for is a little more somber," says Forsaken game director Steve Cotton. "Forsaken starts a little more grounded and personal. We really wanted to focus on your relationship with Cayde, and why you're going to go on this journey. It's interesting to think about the reality that a Guardian can die. It's hard to convince people of that unless you're willing to do it to a character that matters."

The prison-riot mission that opens the campaign and precedes Cayde's death sets the stakes. Through a surprising array of cinematic cutscenes and a bombastic descent into the heart of the Prison of Elders, the solar system's worst criminals are set loose, even as Cayde and my Guardian try to stem the tide. At our side is Petra Venj, our connection to the mysterious Awoken race that is thought to live in the Reef of the asteroid belt. After we're separated, Cayde reaches the lowest depths of the facility first and encounters the real cause of the uproar. Presumed dead by many, we see a face that has been absent in the story since the beginning of The Taken King; the sullen Awoken Prince Uldren has been imprisoned deep within the Prison of Elders, and now stands at the head of an army of creatures twisted from Fallen into a new breed of enemy called the Scorn. "People wanted more about Uldren, the Queen, Petra, and the Reef, so we embraced that," says Forsaken project lead Scott Taylor. "That provides us a nice backdrop to tell a story about what happens when you lose a friend and a mentor, and how you react to that."

Before confronting them, I presumed the new Scorn enemies would be reminiscent of the Red Legion evolution of the Cabal, or the Devil Splicers we fought in Rise of Iron. While I enjoyed confronting both of those enemy groups, I could never shake the sensation that they were mostly reskins of existing foes. The Scorn are different. While they were once Fallen, corrupted Ether, suffering through strange experiments, repeated reanimation, and being buried alive in the heart of

The Spider is the deposed mob boss of the Tangled Shore. He has the unsavory hobby of collecting dead ghosts

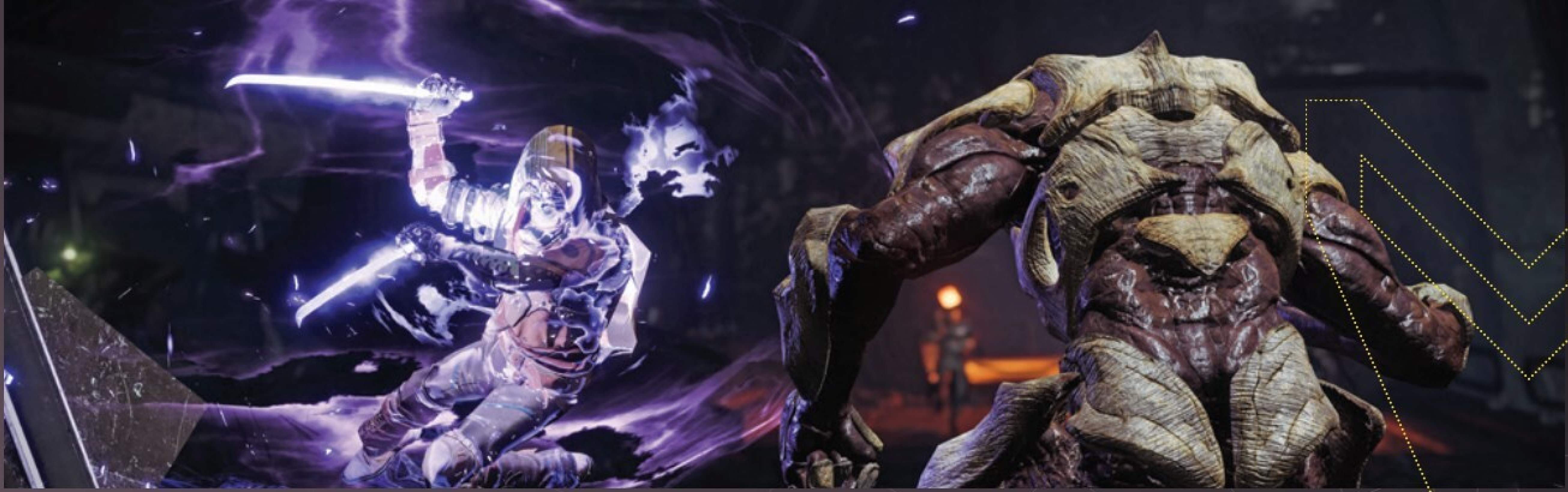
an asteroid has mutated these enemies. "They are this group that was locked in the deepest parts of the Prison of Elders," says High Moon Studios game director and studio VP Matt Tieger. "They became something horrible because of that situation. They bonded and mutated within these dark caverns. They're like an evolution of the Fallen if you stuck them in a corner. Kind of like the animals of Australia or Madagascar – weird things develop on this tiny island if you constrain them from any other influence."

Every subtype of Scorn is fundamentally new and demand new strategies to confront. Hulking Mongrels tower over the battlefield, blasting out cascades of lightning that are nearly impossible to dodge. Arachnid-like Screeb scramble on all fours in packs, bloated with dark ether, exploding themselves with a detonation range that puts Cursed Hive Thralls to shame. Raiders send out spinning explosive saw blades of void energy, and disappear into ethereal streams of light to teleport across the field. Lurkers carry small circular gladiatorial shields that stubbornly block my shots until I stagger them with a leg wound. My personal favorite are the Ravagers – hunchbacked skulkers who charge at first sight, spinning lantern-like censers that they slam into the ground to create a gout of solar flame – unless I nail a satisfying clink of a precision hit on their weapon first. "The Ravager was the lightning rod where we all said: 'We're onto something here,'" Tieger says.

Holding them all together are the Chieftains, who introduce a new twist on fights by throwing out one of three distinct totems. Solar totems are spinning turrets of flame that act as area denial in their radius; more than a few seconds inside is a recipe for respawn. Void totems create an invulnerable shield to all enemies in medium range; when it shows up, other priority targets must take a back seat until I blow them up. Arc totems are the most insidious; if one hits near me, it rubber bands my Guardian back toward it, and it's impossible to escape until it's destroyed, even as other Scorn inevitably charge my location. That's the defining feature of all the Scorn; they don't take cover, and they don't retreat. They're by far the most overtly aggressive A.I. in the game, and their various tricks combine to constantly keep you on your toes. Expect to find yourself backing up and leaping high into the air far more when fighting the Scorn than with any other enemy group you've faced in Destiny.

Faced against the combined might of these angry prisoners, an action-packed cinematic shows Cayde in fine form as he puts up a heroic last stand. But when a sniper destroys his Ghost, the affable Hunter is at the end of the line, and the sequence goes to great pains to make sure you hate the guy who pulls the trigger, as Uldren takes up Cayde's own Ace of Spades gun to do the deed. "We talked a lot early on about a thin line between light and dark," Cotton says. "All the characters are going to walk that line, even Uldren himself. The fact that he's trying to find his sister, but he's doing it in the wrong way is important. The player is in the same boat. He's trying to avenge Cayde's death, he wants to make right Cayde's death, but he's doing it by taking revenge, which is not something a Guardian typically does." Uldren escapes with his cadre, and I'm left to take the Exo home for the last time. A frustrated and mourning Vanguard may be tasked with defending the City, but I've got a friend who needs justice done, so I set off alone to the anarchic asteroids of the Reef – a place called the Tangled Shore.

The barons taunt and insult your buddy Cayde as you hunt them across the unruly Wild West of the Tangled Shore



THE NEW SUPERS

Forsaken is keeping the nine subclasses that already exist in the game, but introducing new ways to play with each of them, including new or dramatically reworked supers that change the nature of combat in significant ways.

"For each class, they each have three new ways to play," says Forsaken project lead Scott Taylor. "On the subclasses right now there are two diamonds on the right at the top and bottom of the screen. We're essentially inserting a third one. We'll probably deliver three on day one, and have the others take a little bit longer than players are used to. Imagine one or two weeks before you can even earn the next batch. They won't all be available on day one."

I played with all nine of the new supers and their related powers and perks. My takeaway is that each felt like a slightly more advanced play style than earlier paths that launched with Destiny 2, with further opportunities for synergistic abilities. It's also interesting to note that every class now has more options for fireteam support roles in at least one of their new supers.

Titan

SENTINEL – CODE OF THE COMMANDER

Melees cause explosions, but all void ability damage also attaches a Void Detonator, and any subsequent damage causes the detonator to go off and attach detonators to enemies caught in the explosion. Grenade energy partially recharges for you and nearby allies when detonators trigger. BANNER SHIELD can still be used for offense like normal, but holding guard creates a barrier wall of light that absorbs enemy attacks but allows ally attacks to pass through.

FANTASY? Don't worry, my friends. I am your shield!

SUNBREAKER – CODE OF THE DEVASTATOR

Throw your hammer with the melee button, but it remains in the world – risk retrieving it where it fell to fully recharge your melee ability, and trigger health regen. The more solar-ability kills you get, the higher your damage, up to 3x. SIEGE HAMMER creates a flaming maul that hits like an earthquake and leaves behind flame tornadoes.

FANTASY? Be the front line, crush the front line, move the front line.

STRIKER – CODE OF THE MISSILE

While airborne, melee to slam into the ground like a bunker buster, and gain super energy for your trouble. If you pick up ammo while sliding you automatically reload your equipped weapon and increase weapon damage for a short time. THUNDERCRASH sends you hurtling great distances like a missile to hit a targeted area like a meteor strike.

FANTASY? "Aim high, fly-fight-win."

Warlock

VOIDWALKER – ATTUNEMENT OF FISSION

A new Atomic Breach melee ability creates a void explosion at range, while holding the grenade button down creates a short-range area explosion Supernova. Any void ability kills now heal you and grant ability energy. NOVA WARP empowers you with trans-dimensional hopping abilities, letting you repeatedly teleport short distances and then erupt in a burst of energy.

FANTASY? You are Nightcrawler.

STORMCALLER – ATTUNEMENT OF CONTROL

Tap the melee button to fling out a long-distance electricity ball that eventually detonates and flings a lightning bolt straight downward. Arc kills sometimes create Ionic Traces, a spark of raw arc energy that travels across the ground toward you, which can be collected to recharge abilities. CHAOS REACH fires a long-range blue beam of intense and focused damage dealing, which can be deactivated early to save energy.

FANTASY? Someone's been watching Dragon Ball.

DAWNBLADE – ATTUNEMENT OF GRACE

Melee attacks burn bad guys, but empower allies. Transform your grenade (by holding the button) into a Blessing, a projectile that heals allies and drops retrievable overshield orbs. WELL OF RADIANCE slams your solar sword into the ground, creating a wide-radius aura that rapidly heals and empowers your friends. Any ability that heals or empowers helps regen your non-Super abilities.

FANTASY? Just because you're a cleric, doesn't mean you don't still like wrecking fools.

Hunter

NIGHTSTALKER – WAY OF THE WRAITH

Your melee smoke bomb heavily damages and slows those in its path. Nail the perfect precision kill against a foe to vanish and gain truesight. SPECTRAL BLADES drops you into a veil of shadows to slip behind foes and stab them before they know you're even there.

FANTASY? Is assassin too strong a word?

GUNSLINGER – WAY OF A THOUSAND CUTS

Knife-trick melees fling out a fan of burning blades. In turn, killing burning enemies recharges your knife trick, and burning enemies also recharge your dodge. BLADE BARRAGE doubles down on your knife skills to expel a volley of explosive knives.

FANTASY? Nobody mess with the kunai-throwing ninja.

ARCSTRIDER – WAY OF THE CURRENT

Slide before a melee to unleash a staff-powered uppercut, and any melee hits increase your reload speed. All your arc abilities electrify your enemies, and subsequent melee strikes disorient them and refuel your abilities. Use your staff super like normal if desired, but WHIRLWIND GUARD means that you can guard by spinning your staff, reflecting back projectiles, and tripling your staff's damage afterward.

FANTASY? Darth Maul had some amazing moves.

THE LAWLESS FRONTIER

Forsaken's campaign unfolds in large part on the Tangled Shore. This new destination is a long-awaited opportunity for players to explore the mysteries of the Reef. The asteroids are pockmarked with caves, ramshackle pirate bases, and hidden shortcuts. Creaking old machinery sounds like rusting ships slowly falling apart at anchor. Fallen scavengers do battle against their mutated Scorn cousins. A crashed tomb ship swarms with Hive. Remnants of the Red Legion scramble for territory. In the distance, a majestic Awoken Watchtower looms over the area, promising lost secrets. High Moon Studios partnered with Bungie not only on the Scorn, but also to bring life to this chaotic new Reef destination and its adventures. “We wanted to tell a Western,” Tieger says. “We came down to this phrase that is the heart of what we were trying to accomplish: ‘Brave the lawless frontier.’ That was the core heart of the story – stepping beyond the reach of the Vanguard, going into a place that is not sanctioned by Zavala, where you can't trust anybody.”

“When I turn the corner, it's the feeling that I'm seeing something that no one within the Vanguard has seen before,” says High Moon Studios game director Matt Tieger. “I'm not going to an area we are trying to reclaim; this is turf that we don't even belong in.”

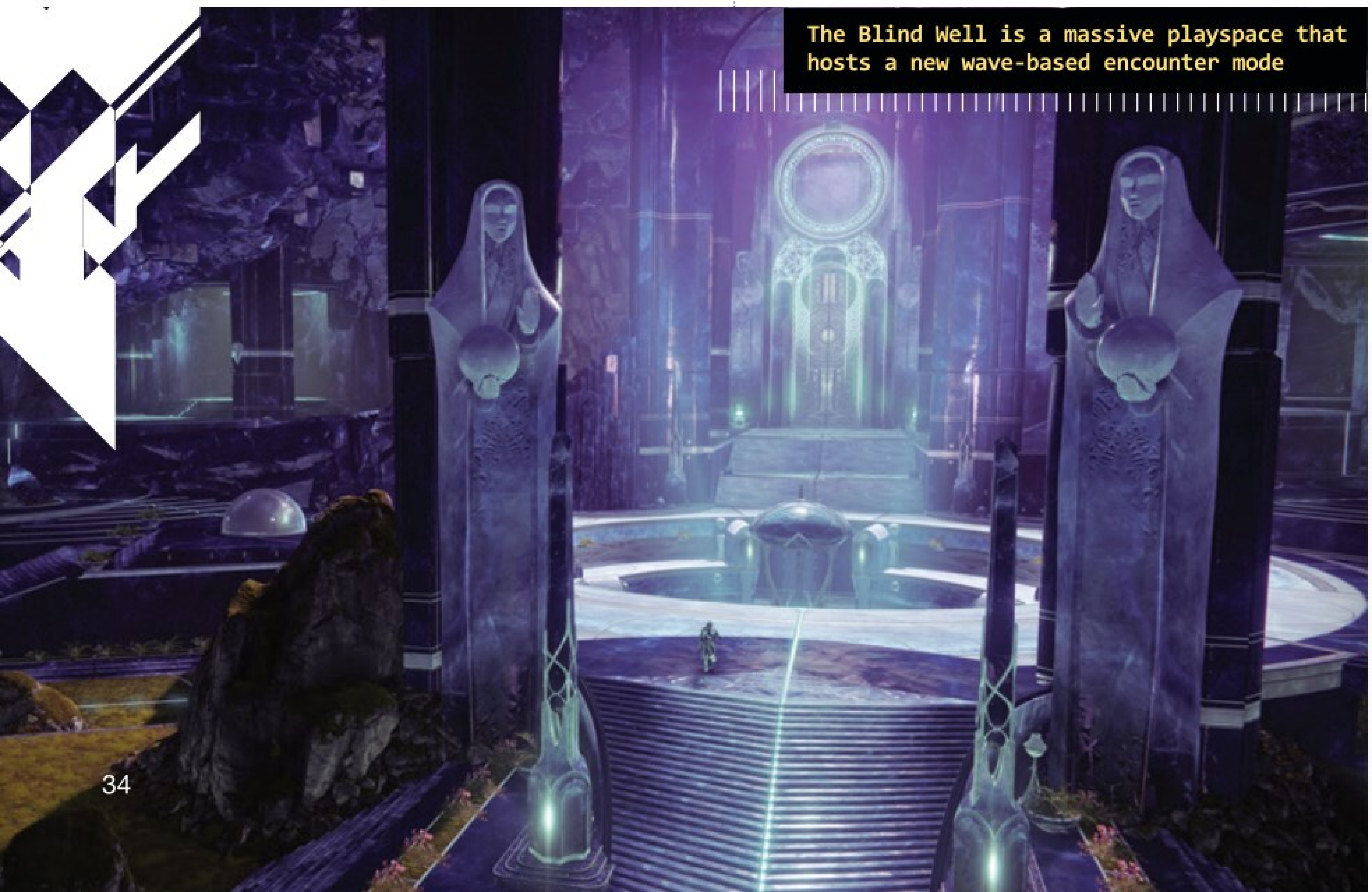
Descending past the hidden smuggler's caches, I meet the Spider. This Fallen mob boss once held sway over the Tangled Shore, but the arrival of Uldren sent him into hiding. Not only is the Spider the vendor for the destination, but an uneasy alliance with him and his Fallen forces gives me the only help I can expect this far out from the Vanguard. His spike-backed Fallen enforcers often accompany me on subsequent adventures, lending support while rarely wading into the most dangerous confrontations. Early on, he wants these new invaders dealt with. After the campaign, he cashes in favors to demand yet more work, hunting down other outlaws from the Prison of Elders as they spread out across the system, where I must confront them as they appear in random world locations, strikes, in the midst of a Gambit match, or in revitalized and high-level Lost Sectors on old destination planets.

But before that can happen, I have to deal with the Barons. The meat of the Forsaken campaign awaits in these Baron Hunts, where one by one I knock off the criminals who had a hand in Cayde's death. Here, the Western overtones of the setting really hit home, as each of the baddies is a named boss rooted in familiar Old West archetypes. The Rider may pilot a futuristic Pike, but she's really the heartless cattle rustler, and you must mount up and chase her across the borderlands. The Mad Bomber may shout insane taunts as he flings out explosives, but behind the façade he's the wild-eyed bandit strapped with dynamite.

The Baron Hunts eschew the campaign structure we've come to expect. The bulk of these encounters can be tackled in your preferred order. Only after six Barons have gone down does the game move back onto a linear narrative path for the remaining two, and then a final confrontation with Uldren. I played through each of the Baron Hunts, and was struck by how bespoke each felt. The overriding theme of each character is baked into their missions. The Rifleman is a sniper, so the mission focuses on long sightlines and spotting shooters on distant outcroppings, and I'd be crazy to not bring a distance weapon into the final encounter. The Trickster baits me with traps and hidden explosives, and I'll be amazed if every player doesn't fall for the very first one she puts in their path. The final battles with each of these Scorn adversaries are reminiscent of strike boss encounters, demanding distinct strategies to match their abilities, and with an added emotional punch. “It was really important to us that you met these Barons early, and had a personal vendetta against them,” Cotton says. “You already hate the character you're going after before you get to them.”

As I crossed each name off my list, I was surprised by the intuitive nature of the new weapon-slot system (see sidebar), and how much fun and freedom it provides. It was exciting to roll into a public event with a fusion rifle once again in my Energy-weapon slot, even as I zeroed in headshots on the boss with a sniper rifle in the Kinetic slot. Since multiple equipped weapons might now be using the same ammo type, I had to think carefully about ammo use, and weigh the risks and rewards of a high-powered output.

While I have little idea how it will fit into the eventual balance curve against other weapons, I immediately fell in love with the new bow. It's now my favorite weapon to shoot in Destiny, unseating the satisfying kick of hand cannons in my personal scale of enjoyable shooting. For much of the campaign, I found myself leaping between vantage points, taking time to pull the string all the way back, and nailing the perfect headshot. In fast and frenzied exchanges, I could loose arrows early for lower damage and an arcing fire line. The compound bow I used included explosive heads on the arrows for added hilarity. As an archetype, the weapon is skill-focused, exchanging rate of fire for devastating precision damage at short and



The Blind Well is a massive playspace that hosts a new wave-based encounter mode

medium range. Amid other criticisms leveled at Bungie, it's easy to forget that with Destiny, the developer pioneered some of the best gunplay in the industry. The thrill of bow shooting is a potent reminder of that strength, even if the term "gunplay" now needs to stretch a bit to encompass the new experience.

In between missions, I spend a lot of time trying out new weapons in freeform wandering across the Tangled Shore. "You are standing on the edge of the void," Tieger says. "It's not a planet, it's not a moon – it's flotsam and jetsam, [a] collection of asteroids that are lashed together with grappling hooks, cables, and duct tape. You can look down and see the abyss of space all the time. It contributes to this feeling that you are never safe anywhere." A new public event with several variations repeatedly offers a great way to level up for my next baron fight. In the Cryo-Cell Escape, cryopods from the Prison of Elders crash down, and are sought out by enemy forces looking to reclaim their imprisoned leader. After fending off a couple waves of attackers, the pod cracks open and a boss enemy pops out, even as the accompanying waves intensify. Occasional bursts of freezing, slowing cryo-mist force me to pull back to greater range. I also found the Lost Sectors of the Tangled Shore to be more nuanced than most we've seen until now. In particular, I was delighted by an underground Fallen hideaway that involves a black-market fighting ring, cages of vicious war beasts, and a chance to learn about the Fallen's bizarre take on a dance club.

While the events surrounding my ultimate confrontation with Uldren would spoil too much, it's enough to know that the closing act of the main campaign teases a greater threat, forcing my Guardian to turn from thoughts of revenge to something more important. A strange voice calls to Uldren from beyond the Awoken Watchtower, within which lies the greatest secrets of the Awoken people.

UNDERSTANDING THE NEW WEAPON SLOTS

Responding to critiques that Destiny 2's weapons infrastructure was too limiting, Forsaken debuts a new approach to weapon types, with a focus on flexibility, ease-of-use, and helping Guardians feel powerful through their loadout selections. "We definitely heard and felt ourselves the issues with the weapon slots that shipped with Destiny 2," says Forsaken project lead Scott Taylor. "But we were happy that we were able to find a solution that was an evolution from that, and not just regressing to exactly what Destiny 1 did." To understand the system and what's changed from the first year of Destiny 2, it might help to remember three interlocking concepts.

- AMMO TYPE IS NO LONGER DIRECTLY TIED TO WEAPON SLOTS. Instead, ammo type dictates the power of the weapon and the relative rarity of finding that ammo type. Weapons using primary white and special green ammo can show up in either the Kinetic or Energy slot. A weapon in the Power slot still always uses heavy purple ammo.
- MANY WEAPON ARCHETYPES HAVE MOVED OUT OF THE POWER SLOT, and these weapons can now appear in either the Kinetic or Energy weapon slot. Individual weapons always drop into a specific slot; for example, Hawthorne's Field-Forged Shotgun has become a Kinetic weapon, and is always found in that slot.
- RARE EXCEPTIONS SOMETIMES BREAK THE RULES, and show up in a different slot or with alternate ammo. For instance, an especially powerful bow might use green ammo. Or some shotguns (like Legend of Acrius) might be so strong that they sit in the Power slot.

Here are the archetypes you can commonly expect to find using each ammo type:

- THESE WEAPONS ARE FOUND IN THE KINETIC OR ENERGY SLOTS, AND USE PRIMARY WHITE AMMO: auto rifles, bows, hand cannons, pulse rifles, scout rifles, sidearms, and submachine guns.
- THESE WEAPONS ARE FOUND IN THE KINETIC OR ENERGY SLOTS, AND USE GREEN SPECIAL AMMO: breech-loaded grenade launchers, fusion rifles, shotguns, sniper rifles, and trace rifles.
- THESE WEAPONS ARE FOUND IN THE POWER SLOT, AND USE PURPLE HEAVY AMMO: drum-loaded grenade launchers, linear fusion rifles, rocket launchers, and swords.

Put that all together, and you can imagine the possibilities. Love distance shooting? Equip a sniper rifle in your Kinetic slot for pesky adds, a solar scout rifle to drop that Wizard's shield in your Energy slot, and maybe even a linear fusion rifle in your Power slot to finish them off. Like things up close and personal? Three shotguns are a viable option, but you'll have to confront a likely shortage of ammo, since dropped ammo is split evenly between weapons that share the same ammo type. In practice, I found the system rewarding, and it was a blast to have more opportunities to use old favorites like my Main Ingredient fusion rifle (now in the Energy slot) in moment-to-moment play. I also found myself more likely to pause and adjust my loadout to specific scenarios at hand. "We're trying to make the choice of what weapon you're using at any given time more interesting," says Forsaken game director Steve Cotton.

All of Destiny 2's legendary and exotic equipment from the first year can be infused and carried forward into Forsaken and beyond

THE DREAMING CITY

Forsaken saves its most unusual innovation for its most dedicated players. The Dreaming City is the long-hidden home of the Awoken, and acts as an aspirational location filled with secrets, new activities, a new raid, and dynamic content that changes week to week. "What you come to learn through the campaign is that everyone is trying to get to the Dreaming City," Taylor says. "Unlike recent expansions, there are threads that you learn toward the end of the campaign that are only fully paid off once you beat the raid." Just like the Tangled Shore, the Dreaming City is a full-sized destination about the size of Nessus, explorable on your sparrow, and filled with opportunities for discovery modeled after the success of the Dreadnaught from The Taken King.

But unlike the Tangled Shore, you won't go there during the campaign. You can't enter the Dreaming City until you finish the campaign, and even then, you might not be powerful enough to face the threats that lurk within – there's even a quest after the campaign concludes to reopen access to this mythic land. "This will be the first destination that we've hidden from players until they believe they've completed the story," Cotton says. Dedicated players must level up and earn the gear they'll need to face the threats, and there's plenty of leveling to be done; Forsaken moves the level cap up to 50, and the power cap to 600. The creatures of the Dreaming City might even have question marks above their heads at first, suggesting that they're well beyond your current tier.

Virtually drawn from the pages of a classic fantasy novel, this is the elven homeland under threat from an insidious dragon that has infected its heart. Across the life of the franchise, Destiny has boasted some amazing sky boxes, environmental set pieces, and top-notch art. I can say without hesitation that the Dreaming City is the most picturesque work the developers have produced. Filigreed domes encompass vine-encrusted terraces. Towering suspension bridges cross vast gulfs high above the ground. Cloistered shrines hide ancient gnarled trees whose roots stretch out and down cliff edges. Craggy mountains

CERBERUS +1

This wild new exotic auto rifle is inspired by the Contra spread gun, and it really is four different barrels all strapped together into one Frankenstein of a weapon. Cerberus +1 shoots out in four directions at once, so it can be devastating in the right circumstances, especially if you can line up your distance-from-target with multiple bullet streams. We'll have an in-depth look at the new exotic at gameinformer.com.

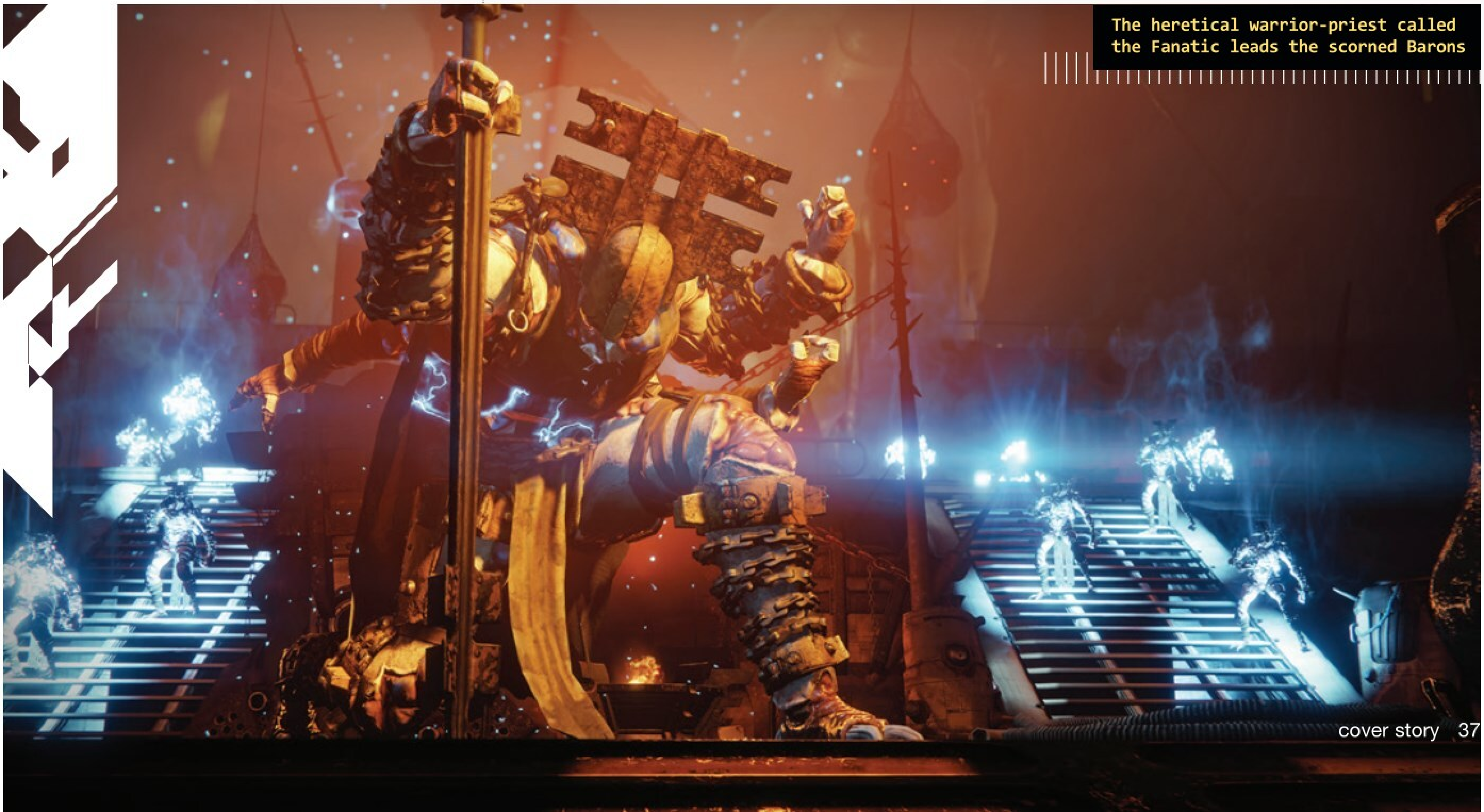
dotted with green beg to be explored.

But the Dreaming City is more than it first appears to be. While the breathtaking architecture and landscapes are impressive, they're also infected by the curse of the Taken. Moments after arriving for the first time, I am pulled into the Ascendant Realm (think *Stranger Things*' Upside Down) and nearly overcome by Taken foes. The destination exists across these dual planes, and it will take weeks to fully unravel the mystery. That's not a figure of speech; the Dreaming City will literally change from one week to the next along a three-week cycle. As the destination's vendor and guiding character, Petra Venj moves to new locations over time. New secrets and missions reveal themselves. Enemy configurations and power levels increase. The Taken curse takes greater hold, and the environmental art changes to suit. At the end of the cycle, I'm told a greater secret awaits discovery for pinnacle players to confront. "Over weeks, the destination becomes more and more cursed, and it's more evident that things are not right here," Cotton says. "And the players are the ones that start this change to the world."

Even after many days of play, my Guardian wasn't up to snuff to confront all of the Dreaming City's threats. But there was plenty to whet my appetite. A new tower-defense style public event called Rift Generator saw my guardian powering up Awoken attack pillars in order to hold off an invasion of Scorn forces marching out of the mists. Loot caches provide offerings to take to the Blind Well, a vast cathedral of an arena where three to six players can confront a new take on wave-based fights ala Court of Oryx, Archon's Forge, or Escalation Protocol. "The entire arena gets shrouded in poison Taken gas, except for the places that you're allowed to fight," Cotton says. "As you work your way around, you get more and more real estate to fight in. It culminates in a boss, and you have to utilize those places you defended to take out the boss."

Wandering around the periphery of the city, dropped flasks allow players to briefly glimpse into the Ascendant Realm to face special challenges, or travel along platforms or tunnels that don't exist in the real world to find secret chests. Mysterious portals, usually hidden in hard-to-find spots, link together distant portions of the destination for reasons I couldn't glean. Looming at the center of the city is a great castle on the mountain called the Keep of Voices, where the new raid beckons. Within, we're promised the continuation of the narrative introduced with Uldren's madness in the campaign, and the reveal of the greater threat behind the curtain.

The early version of the game I played meant I couldn't glean all of the ways in which players might be exploring the destination, but it's clear that the entire area has been built with long-term replayability as the central goal. "There's always something out there that you're working toward," Cotton says. "There are some deep exotic chases that are deterministic. Some of them are secret, and you're going to have to figure out how to get them, some of them even weeks into the release. The Dreaming City has enough secrets and puzzles that you're not going to be able to do them all right away."



The heretical warrior-priest called the Fanatic leads the scorned Barons

DESTINY'S PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE: AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTOPHER BARRETT

I sat down with Destiny 2 game director Christopher Barrett for a wide-ranging conversation on the state of the game, the challenges of the last year, and the opportunities for Destiny 2 to evolve this fall and beyond.

What does it mean to be the overall game director for Destiny 2?
Well, it is a busy job, I will tell you that. I guess it's a 30,000 foot view of everything in the works. It's thinking about the short term, working with the team on fixes and new features we want to get in. Whether it is changing a game mode in the Crucible, or larger releases like Warmind and Forsaken. But it's also having the view of where we want to go. Listening to both community and our team, and considering how we want the game to evolve six months or even two years from now.

Has there been a shift in how your team organizes that, specifically with you in a leadership role where you're shepherding the broader game forward?
Yeah, we realized we wanted to have a clear road map for players, and not just be focused on the next thing. Thinking about how the current release and the release after that and how they all relate to each other, and making sure we're making smart decisions, and that they don't feel like separate products.

With Destiny 2, were there things that surprised you and the team in terms of criticisms leveled at the game?
We were a little surprised that the game didn't have as much staying power, as far as the endgame and the long tail. We realized that pretty early, and so we began adding new features as quickly as possible like Masterworks, and pushed on Warmind to have a lot more endgame content, like Escalation Protocol, Exotic quests, discoverable items, secrets, and stuff like that. With Destiny 2, we wanted to make Destiny enjoyable by more players. There were a lot of potentially rough edges and some pretty complicated systems in Destiny 1, and we wanted to make the game more approachable and not require the Internet to figure out. But we ended up taking away a little bit of the magic that made players come back week after week, those deeper systems that kept the game engaging for weeks or months after release.

As you've considered ways to respond to player feedback, is there a danger in "design by community?"
Oh, absolutely. If any developer were to just go onto forums and design their game based on what they saw there, well, that would be would be an interesting experiment, but also nearly impossible. For every opinion you can find someone arguing the opposite. Nonetheless, it's a huge source of information. These are players who are playing the game potentially every day, and putting in hundreds of hours. And we make sure that we as developers are listening to those players, but also not just the loudest voices in the community. We have a great community team who is giving us reports as they're out there talking to players and gathering the stuff that's out online. That's really important, but it's one factor, right? There's also the people working on Destiny, taking their expertise and where we want to take the game. It's a balance. So, we definitely don't want to just design the game by what we read online, but if 99 percent of your players are all saying "We want random rolls back!," it's something you've got to think seriously about, even if potentially you have a different idea about where you want to take a system.

As you work to make changes to the game in the lead-up to Forsaken, what are the most challenging features to confront?
The biggest ones are systems that touch the entire game, like weapon slots. The new change is going to be awesome, but that touches how all the weapons in the game work, all the potential loadouts that players might have, and how they play every activity. What happens when you bring three shotguns into a Raid? Like, do we have to test that scenario? And how does that work? And we have to be mindful of how Crucible works. We have to think about how PvE works. We have to worry about the ammo economy and how it works in both types of scenarios.
Also, bigger features like Collections and Triumphs – anytime there is this large system like that which has UI associated with it and touches all the rewards in the game. Destiny is a pretty complicated game, so when you have a system that tracks everything you do

and all the items you collect, it's just a lot of work for many different teams. But we're certainly excited by those features, and those are things that we've wanted in the game for a long time, but they're also the ones that are the toughest.

Why not just go back to how weapon slots worked in the original Destiny?
You know, that's been a long conversation. It's such a fundamental part of the game that we considered all the options. We talked for a long time about, should we keep it how it is, should we change it back to Destiny 1 style, should we do something even more radical, should we add a fourth weapon slot? Emotionally, the idea of going backward is not something we necessarily wanted to do. That may have been sort of a band-aid solution. We really wanted to learn from what was great about Destiny 1, what worked well in Destiny 2, and try and take the best of both worlds and put them together into something that felt like an evolution, so that we felt like we were moving forward and it gave us something better.

How do you feel the annual pass is going to be a better delivery method for new content after Forsaken releases?
We want to give players more stuff more often. We also want to focus on what players want- we've found that Escalation Protocol, weapon quests, cooperative experiences, new things for players to earn and play with in the sandbox – those are the kind of things that players enjoy. So, we're going to focus a lot more on those kind of experiences, instead of necessarily a two-hour story that you're done with and never play again.

Does that mean that players shouldn't expect story content?

I won't get into too many specifics, but no. Lore, story, characters: Those are always important to experiences in Destiny. It's really about not focusing on those one-and-done story campaigns that you play through once. It's about taking story and focusing it toward replayable experiences and content that extends the game.

Is the thought that you would have more regularly spaced seasons with content for all players?
Our intention is absolutely what you're suggesting – to have four seasons throughout the year that are equally spaced that have both free content available to all players like Iron Banner and Clan Seasons along with additional Annual Pass content like the Black Armory and Joker's Wild.

Will new triumphs come throughout the year?
Yep, that's absolutely the intention. As events happen and new releases come out, the Triumphs page – as well as Collections – will be updated with what's new to earn and collect.

In broad terms, how is the storytelling tone of Destiny 2 shifting in the second year?
We want to shift the tone of Destiny to be a little bit darker, a little bit weirder. One of the exciting things about the world of Destiny is the mystery of it, the exploration, the strange worlds that we've built. So, we want the tone of the story and the cinematics to actually reflect that. And that doesn't mean that comedy or humor doesn't have a place in that world – it absolutely does – but it can't be every time a character speaks or every time the Ghost talks that they're trying to do a one-liner joke. We definitely want to shift the tone to be a little bit more epic sci-fi. That's something a lot of players really love about the world of Destiny.

Every one of the barons has a detailed backstory and fiction wrapped around them

REFRESHING THE HOBBY

Replayability is a running theme for the developers at Bungie and High Moon, as Forsaken also features a wholesale redesign of how the game tracks achievements, governs collection, and organizes day-to-day play. “We want to make it less obvious when you’re completely finished for the week,” Cotton says. “We think that players will feel more agency going out into the world and figuring out how to get these things.”

That begins with the Director, where players select their activity or destination. This screen has been redesigned to provide intuitive guides to meaningful content (think flashing destinations when something interesting is happening), and less focus on milestones as the principle guiding hand to progression. Instead, the Director offers a more organic approach to letting you play the way you want and progress no matter how you prefer to play. “It’s about getting to the place that anytime I log into Destiny, there’s something fun for me to do that makes me feel like I’m moving forward toward some goal,” Taylor says. Crucible and Vanguard nodes have moved to prominent locations at the bottom of the screen, and are now joined by a dedicated node for the new Gambit game mode. All of those activities (along with Flashpoints) refresh every four days, even as the raid remains on a weekly cycle. Daily heroic missions have returned, and appear on their respective destinations. Individual strikes are now selectable on their maps, whether it’s heading to Io for a return to the familiar Pyramidion, or one of the four new strikes, like the one where our Guardians infiltrate the Prison of Elders to dodge trains and fight on an old battlefield only familiar to original Destiny players.

Managing inventory and vault spaces has

"The name Forsaken speaks to a lot of different parts of the game," says Forsaken game director Steve Cotton. "Uldren is forsaken. You as a player become forsaken by the Vanguard during your journey. Even the Dreaming City as a place was forsaken at a certain point."

been an intractable problem for years, and the core release of Destiny 2 did little to resolve issues for collectors. That's changing in Forsaken, as the new Collections feature tracks virtually everything you gather in the game, with clear indications of what you have and haven't collected, and usually an indication of how to get what is still missing. "Some things are still a mystery; some things show up as a question mark and you've got to figure out what they are," Cotton says. "The goal is to have this be your trophy rack." Even if you've dismantled an item, you can usually pull it back out for a minor cost of in-game currency. And the game even remembers things you've dismantled as far back as February of this year. Retrievable items from the Collection include ships, sparrows, Ghost shells, exotic armor and weapons, shaders, emblems, and emotes – once you have them, most can be rebought into your inventory at will. If you'd prefer not to have to spend anything, the Vault is expanding out to 500 slots to store extras.

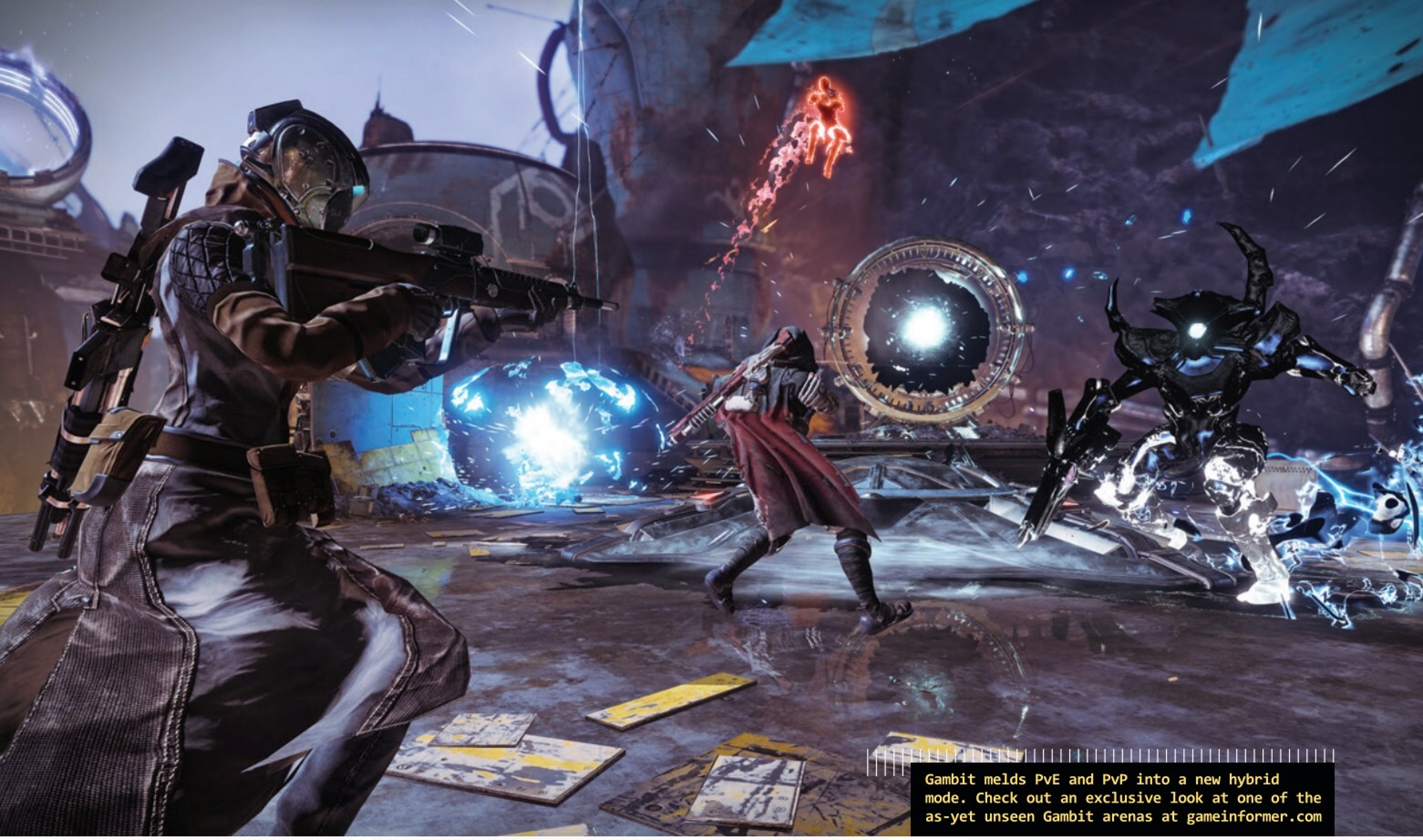
Legendary weapons and armor show up in your collection, but you won't be able to retrieve duplicates of new legendaries from your collection. That's because new legendary armor and weapons once again drop with random perks, so there's no set version of the item to retrieve. However, there's nothing preventing you from keeping multiple twists on the same piece of gear in those extra vault slots. "You're always looking for that god-roll, which isn't happening today," Cotton says. "The perks are going to be new and different, but the actual mechanic of random rolls is the same as it was in the original Destiny." Pre-Forsaken legendary armor and weapons won't be getting new random perks; they'll maintain the same static qualities they featured throughout Destiny 2's first year, and because of that, you'll be able to retrieve new duplicates from your Collections.

Mods are also being overhauled, and are recoverable from dismantled legendary gear. "Mods are the player's way of improving and customizing, even beyond random rolls," Cotton says. "There are fewer mods that are more interesting. Mods are a way of doubling down on the weapons that you like." Mods feature fewer conditionals that limit what class or weapon type they can apply to, and most of the individual mods I learned about allow you to specialize a piece of gear into a preferred play style, like increased hip fire or airborne accuracy, or extra damage against vehicles. Mods no longer boost an item up by five points in power, but they make any given piece of armor or weapon more nuanced.

Even as gear collection gets deeper, a new category of character progression and investment takes center stage. Triumphs are an evolution of the successful record book concept seen in the original Destiny, but with a broader reach that sees new nodes and pursuits added with each new content drop. "With the triumphs, we're trying to give you an answer to 'What do I want to do?'" Taylor says. "We're trying to move away from the checklist quality of Destiny. We want it to feel like there are multiple things to pursue, and some of them can layer on top of each other. I always feel super-smart when I'm stacking those things on top of each other."

Out of the gate, I could already track and acquire triumphs from categories including character, destinations, events, Gambit, PvP, Vanguard, lore, and timeworn labors, which are tasks that can only be accomplished in certain time periods. For fiction enthusiasts, the Triumphs also introduce a bevy of new written stories to chase in the lore group, collectible in small snippets from throughout both new and old locations. Whether it's the sordid history of Cayde as found in hidden chests across the solar system, or the sacred texts of the Awoken discoverable in the Dreaming City, there are dozens of lore fragments to gather, and between 10 and 15 distinct stories to enrich your understanding of the universe – all readable in-game. "We wanted to tell stories about where Variks was, for instance," Taylor says. "The people who really want to know what Variks is up to are the people who have been with us for a long time. This new feature is the way we're going to make those things feel really awesome for people who know Destiny well."

Your triumphs are more than individual unlocked feats. Every triumph contributes to a Triumph score, akin to the Grimoire score from the original Destiny, but instead built around everything you do in the game. Like every high-score board since gaming began, the Triumph score gives you something to aspire toward. You also get emblems to show off specific triumph thresholds. Moreover, if you specialize in a particular category, you unlock meta-goals that reward any of around a dozen titles. You can then display your mastery of the Crucible, lore, or other achievements for all to see beside your name.



Gambit melds PvE and PvP into a new hybrid mode. Check out an exclusive look at one of the as-yet unseen Gambit arenas at gameinformer.com

PUTTING ALL THE PIECES TOGETHER

Two of the biggest features coming to Destiny 2: Forsaken involve players in competition with one another.

If you've been following the game's announcements, you've already had a chance to see Gambit, a new style of play that melds cooperative team play with competitive strategy and skill, all run by a mysterious new in-game character named the Drifter. "The Drifter is not a Guardian," Cotton says. "He's a wanderer that has gone far out into the reaches of the solar system, and he's come back with gadgets, trinkets, and machines." Demoed extensively at E3 a few weeks ago, the new mode sees teams of four facing off, each in their own arena filled with alien attackers like Cabal and Fallen. By killing A.I. enemies, your team gathers motes that must be returned to a receptacle. Gathered motes spawn Blocker Taken enemies for the opposing team, preventing them from depositing their own motes. Gather enough motes, and you can even invade the enemy team's space yourself, before finally gathering enough to face a giant boss on your own side to win the round. "Gambit is exciting to me because it's the promise that Destiny has been making for a long time – this combination of PvE and PvP together," Cotton says.

Bungie also has some big announcements for true PvP Crucible play. For the first time, Crucible improvements have been decoupled from content expansions like Forsaken. "This means that we're able to evolve the Crucible at a faster pace, and react more quickly than we could in the past," says PvP design lead Derek Carroll. "Ahead of Forsaken, players will already be enjoying 6v6 Quickplay and an always-there Rumble playlist. When Forsaken drops, we'll actually lay low for a few weeks before rolling out four new maps and a new team mode called Breakthrough."

Breakthrough fits in the Competitive playlist, and it's designed for two teams of four players. "At the start of each round, both teams attempt to control the Breaker, which will allow you to hack the enemy Vault," Carroll explains. "Once the central Breaker is owned, it can't be recaptured and one team goes on the defensive. The attackers need to capture the Vault before time runs out to win the round, or else the defenders get the point." The new mode feels fast and intense, with a strong focus on objectives. Three of the four new Crucible maps this fall are designed specifically with an eye toward use in Breakthrough.

Anyone who plays a lot of Destiny 2 knows some pivotal challenges lie ahead to integrate competitive experiences with the host of new features that will be arriving around the same time, like new supers, random weapon rolls, a bevy of new exotics, and more. That specific challenge speaks to the broader ambition of Forsaken, which simultaneously reinvents Destiny 2's core systems and boldly pushes into new territories and adventures.

I reluctantly stepped away from my time with the game and the glimpse it offered into the future, but left with a sensation of intense enthusiasm. That's tempered by the knowledge that this is one of the most complicated juggling acts that Bungie and its partners have ever attempted. The scope of the expansion is vast, and nearly all the parts need to fit just right or the structure may fall apart. As recent weeks have attested, Forsaken will arrive at a time in which competitors like Anthem and The Division 2 will be nipping at its heels. It's safe to say that Destiny 2 needs a big win. Forsaken has the makings of a phenomenally absorbing and long-tail gaming experience – now we just have to wait to see if all the pieces can fit together. ◆

Hungry for more info on Destiny 2: Forsaken? We have a full month of coverage planned, with videos, interviews, and exclusive footage of new activities and destinations, including the backstories of the murderous Barons, a playthrough of the new Blind Well game mode, videos of all the new supers in action, plus a wealth of other details. Follow along at gameinformer.com/forsaken

E3
HOT 50

E3 once again opened its doors to the public this year, offering fans and critics alike plenty of amazing games to get excited about. Sony stunned showgoers with exclusives like Spider-Man, The Last of Us Part II, and Ghost of Tsushima, while Nintendo kept fans happy with weeklong Super Smash Bros. Ultimate competitions. More than any year in recent memory, however, third-party publishers ruled the show. CD Projekt Red blew away attendees with Cyberpunk 2077's starkly different take on the open-world RPG, EA let us live out our Iron Man fantasies in Anthem, and Square Enix finally served up hands-on sessions with Kingdom Hearts III. Battlefield V and Call of Duty: Black Ops 4 impressed despite keeping their competing battle-royale modes under wraps, while a host of indie shooters like Generation Zero and GTFO pushed co-op play in new and intriguing directions. As always, we've ranked our favorite games from the show based not only on their playable demos, but also the buzz they generated among the G.I. staff and the larger E3 crowd. Here are our favorites.

01

Cyberpunk 2077

Bright lights, big city

Platform: *PS4, Xbox One, PC* **Style:** *1-Player Role-Playing* **Publisher:** *CD Projekt* **Developer:** *CD Projekt Red* **Release:** *TBA*

No game generated more buzz or praise at E3 2018 than Cyberpunk 2077. CD Projekt Red finally pulled back the curtain on its long-awaited project we first learned about in 2012, and it did so with a bang. Not only did it showcase a teaser trailer at Microsoft's press conference, but CD Projekt Red also came with a 50-minute live demonstration, giving us our first look at the gameplay. It quickly became the most talked about game at the show, drawing long standby lines and jam-packed demos with people crammed from wall to wall just for their first glimpse at The Witcher 3 developer's next big project. Cyberpunk 2077 takes us to a new dangerous world filled with difficult decisions and unexpected consequences, and it's markedly different than The Witcher in its gameplay and setting.

Cyberpunk 2077 is based off the tabletop RPG written by Mike Pondsmith, which first debuted in 1988 and has gone to have later editions, including one set in a fictional 2020. CD Projekt Red is modernizing Pondsmith's vision for the year 2077. Expect some fun callbacks to the tabletop RPG, but also prepare for CD Projekt Red to put its own mark on this dystopian near-future where a socioeconomic collapse has sent the world into a tailspin. "We're doing a lot of world-building with this," says quest designer Patrick Mills. "What we're trying to do is create the feel of Cyberpunk 2020 for a modern audience, so there is a lot of adaptation that's gone into it."

Pondsmith's tabletop games touched on politics, painting a bleak future for our world, and CD Projekt Red isn't shying away from that. "Cyberpunk 2020 was created as a response to the Reagan and Thatcher era," Mills explains. "Then we all kind of got distracted and decided that that whole image of the future is kitsch, but I don't know if you've turned on the news lately, it wound up coming true. I think it's more relevant than ever and it's an interesting task bringing it into the modern era."

From trailers and the demo we saw, Cyberpunk 2077's world is gritty and dangerous. With their greed and corrupt operations, mega corporations are in control. Drug gangs roam the streets. Crime and poverty are at an all-time high. Sex and pop culture dominate the landscape. With not much of a future to fight for, you take on the role of V, a mercenary who has a thirst for danger, undergoing their first big contract. Throughout the game, you decide how V sustains their freedom and what impact they have on the world.

V's appearance is fully customizable, letting you pick tattoos, hairstyles, scars, and more. You can also pick their gender and origin story, which NPCs in the world will react to. You can choose between three classes: Techie (technicians/cybernetic specialists), Netrunner (savvy

computer hackers), and Solo (gunners who pack a punch), but aren't tied to a single path and can mix them all. The fluid class system allows you to customize your skills as you go. CD Projekt Red emphasized being able to modify your character to suit your play style and the developer wants to put as many options in your hands as possible, right down to building your stats such as intelligence and reflexes. You also find and buy gear that increases stats and appears cosmetically on your character.

This is all on top of the cool cyberware upgrades. In our demo, a visit to a ripperdoc gets V implanted with a Kiroshi optical scanner that can scan for threats, access points, and zoom in on objects. Her hand also gets outfitted with a subdermal weapon rig, which allows her to keep count of her ammo and increases her grip pressure for more damage.

As a mercenary, you use your gun quite a bit. You can enhance it with some nifty features, such as being able to shoot through walls and having bullets that can ricochet off the environment and hit enemies behind cover.

Since you're creating your own character and defining them, CD Projekt Red chose a first-person perspective. "This is your story; we want you to inhabit V," Mills says. You were watching Geralt's story in The Witcher, but Cyberpunk 2077 is more about letting your own story unfold. This also extends to romances, providing more diverse relationship experiences than we had in The Witcher 3. "There are a lot more options [for romance]," Mills said. "You're defining your own character here, which means defining their sexuality any way you want. We've got NPCs that are gay, we've got NPCs that are bi, we've got NPCs that are straight, because we want them to feel real and that they have preferences as well."

Just like in The Witcher, dialogue choices are at the heart of the story. CD Projekt Red has earned its reputation for unpredictable, difficult choices, and we see this firsthand in the demo when V takes on a mission to obtain a specialized bot. The job has her crossing paths with shady people in the corporate sector who are upset thieves stole their convoy. When V meets with members of the Militech Corporation, they form a neurolink with her that acts as a lie detector when asking her questions. As seen here, you must evaluate how you want to take on every situation and you can't always plan for everything. Sometimes fighting won't be your best option, and you'd be better off negotiating or bypassing the situation altogether.

Similar to Deus Ex, you can hack doors and enemies if your skill is high enough and use stealth kills as opposed to going in guns blazing. You're a mercenary first, so some scenarios don't provide non-violent options, but it doesn't mean every encounter ends in a shootout. This is CD Projekt Red's first crack at first-person shooting and cover mechanics, but the team is confident they can pull it off. "We have hired people from other studios who are experts in

SILVERHAND

that [area] to help us make it as good as possible," Mills says.

The open world is much more vertical than the flat expanse of The Witcher, so expect to be able to go underground and high in the sky. Mills said the team is working on six different districts for the game, but they're still a work in progress so the actual size isn't determined yet. In the demo, our character drove a futuristic car, so we're guessing there's a lot of ground to cover and plenty of opportunities for high-speed chases.

No other game impressed us as much as Cyberpunk 2077 did at the show, making it earn our number one spot on the Hot 50. CD Projekt Red has a knack for creating interesting stories and having the world reflect your decisions in unpredictable ways. This is sure to play a part in the endings as well. "At the end of the story, we want your story to feel unique," Mills says. "For the number of endings and things like that, it's too far early to say, but it certainly will have a variety." **» *Kimberley Wallace***

02

Spider-Man

Enter the Sinister Six

Platform: PS4 **Style:** 1-Player Action **Publisher:** Sony Interactive Entertainment **Developer:** Insomniac Games **Release:** September 7

The villains were on parade at E3. In the new Spider-Man footage at Sony's E3 press conference, we learned Mister Negative is not alone in his bid to take over New York City. He's just one of the baddies that make up the Sinister Six. His cohorts are the rampaging behemoth Rhino, Electro, who features a radically different design than his comic-book counterparts, Scorpion, Vulture, and…well…Insomniac doesn't want to reveal the final member who appears to be the leader of this misfit group of baddies. Our money is on Green Goblin. Norman Osborn's face is on re-election billboards all across the city. He's front and center, and has always been one of Spidey's greatest foes.

The gameplay clip where this evil ensemble is revealed doesn't take place in the city's streets, and instead unfolds within the tight quarters of The Raft, a supermax prison that rests securely in the East River. Here, we see Electro orchestrate a prison break, freeing dozens of criminals that Spider-Man needs to make short work of. After pummeling a handful of foes with an arsenal of kicks, and a powerful spinning punch he performs after latching onto and darting off of a pillar, Spider-Man calls upon a new gadget called the web blossom to subdue every other prisoner around him. To operate the blossom, he leaps into the air, spins, and sprays webs toward the ground, almost looking like a sprinkler you'd see kids running through in the yard.

After traversing sections of the prison that now lie in ruin, he confronts all of the Sinister Six at once. They beat him down, and seconds before he loses consciousness, he sees their leader, and is surprised by who it is, simply muttering "You?" The demonstration surprisingly ends with Spider-Man's defeat.

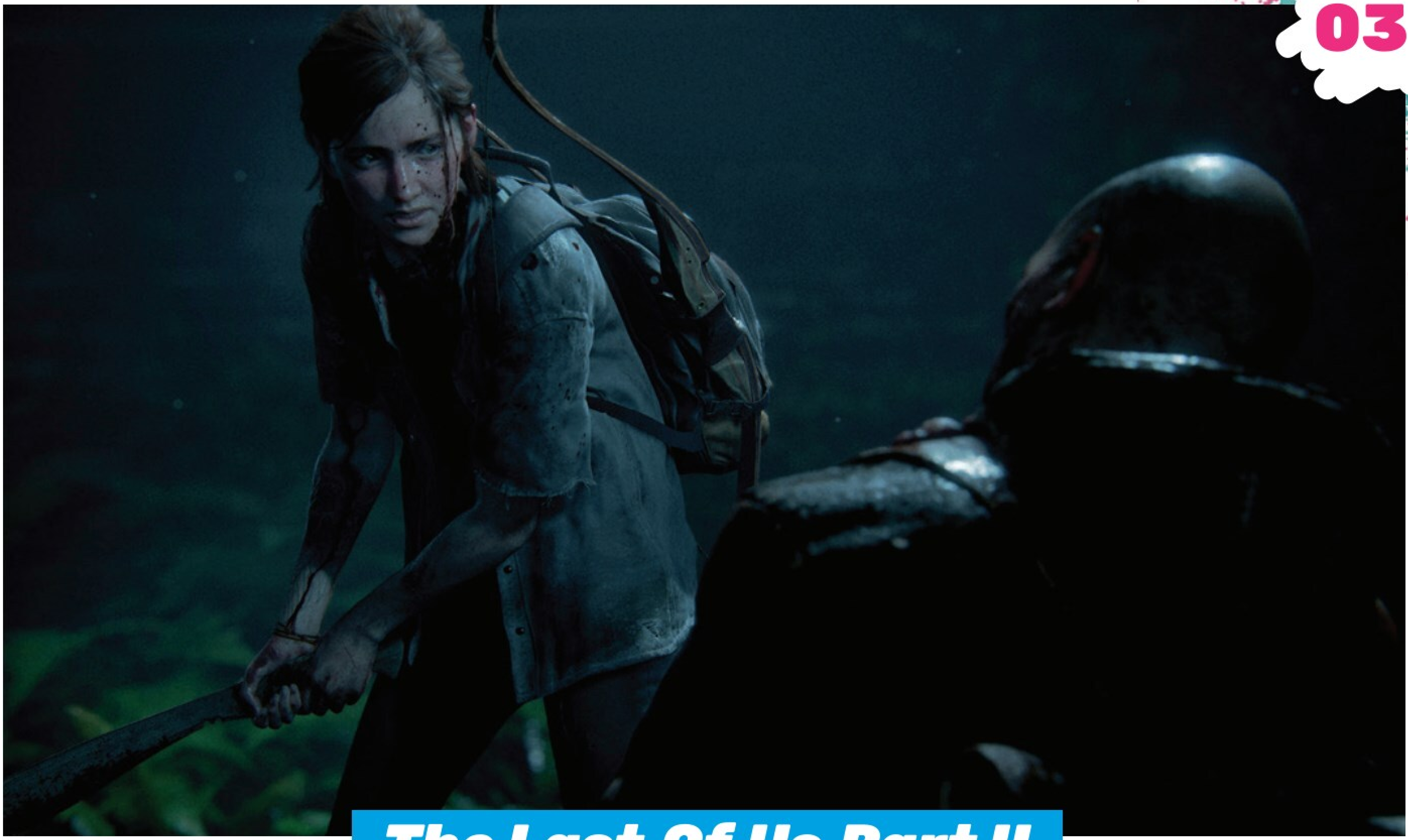
In a *Daily Bugle* newspaper that was handed out to E3 showgoers, one of the articles focuses on Spider-Man missing in action, implying he's now in the hands of the Sinister Six. Not knowing he was defeated, the article reads "Has he finally taken the mayor's threats to heart and swung off to greener pastures?" This hint of Osborn being a threat to the wall crawler again points to Green Goblin likely being in the game.

The paper also teases a number of interesting things like high schooler Miles Morales being a brilliant bot maker who helped make a motion-detecting robot. That sounds an awful lot like it could be the prototype for the Spider Drone. Peter is a brilliant scientist, but could Miles be helping him make robots?

Insomniac clearly loves testing fans' knowledge of the Spider-Man universe with little teases. During an E3 Coliseum panel, which I moderated, Insomniac's creative director Bryan Intihar wore a shirt that read "Visit Symkaria." This Eastern European region of Marvel's universe is best known as the home of Silver Sable, a mercenary who periodically tangles with Spidey.

Following our Spider-Man cover story in May, people wanted to see more "classic" villains in the game, and Insomniac answered that call in a big way at E3. The game looked and played great, showing just how graceful and powerful Spider-Man can be. With only a few months left before the September 7 launch, we just need to see if Insomniac can stick the landing and maintain the fun we've experienced in the demos for an entire game. **» Andrew Reiner**

03



The Last Of Us Part II

Adapting to a harsher environment

Platform: *PS4* **Style:** *1-Player Action (Online TBA)* **Publisher:** *Sony Interactive Entertainment* **Developer:** *Naughty Dog* **Release:** *TBA*

Sony opened its annual E3 press conference by giving us our first look at how Naughty Dog plans to build on the world, characters, and gameplay of The Last of Us Part II. The jaw-dropping visuals, natural character interactions, nuanced writing, and tweaked combat all gave us plenty of reasons to be ridiculously excited for a sequel some of us didn't think we needed.

With Part II taking place five years after Ellie and Joel arrive in Jackson County, we see signs of a society coping with its new world order. Although the Infected still roam the world, the people who've managed to stay alive have formed stable societies – secure enough to host a dance instead of constantly worrying for their lives, anyway. As a 19-year-old Ellie chats up a friend named Jesse, we get confirmation that Joel is indeed still alive and fit enough to help out, leading expeditions into untamed parts of the world. This now includes Seattle, which Naughty Dog confirmed would be one of the game's settings.

We also get an intense scene between Ellie and her friend Dina, who quickly makes her move to be more than just Ellie's friend. Contrasted with the Seattle-based Seraphite religious faction members Ellie goes on to kill later in the trailer, the scene hints that Ellie's sexuality could be more than a simple detail, something Naughty Dog also hinted at without going into specifics. "We're really excited to show all facets of Ellie's personality," says co-writer Halley Gross. "Part of that is who she's attracted to, what her relationships are, who she's willing to play for, so part of that is addressing her sexuality, for sure," she says.

The rest of the trailer shows us our first glimpse of gameplay, and while it might look familiar at first glance, eagle-eyed fans should spot some changes to both stealth and combat. Hiding from enemies is more nuanced, and now uses a more analog system based on how loud your stance is or whether you're sneaking inside bushes.

Stealth isn't on an on-off switch, either. When one enemy sees you, their friends won't immediately know where you are. Instead, enemies will have to communicate with each other through whistles, yells, or other signs in order for each of them get to a read on your location. This means that even if you're spotted, you might be able go incognito again if you manage to off the person who saw you.

Combat sees some changes as well, most of which adapt the gameplay from Joel's older physique to Ellie's younger form. She can dodge out of the way of attacks this time around and can procure melee weapons from defeated enemies as she attacks them.

The game offers more contextual attacks and moves based on the environment around Ellie, further maintaining The Last of Us' cinematic look. While the demo we were shown behind closed doors was hands-off, the combat encounters featured plenty of outstanding scripted animations, leading to fights that feel nuanced and natural.

The increased focus on non-interactive moments doesn't mean the game will be easier, however. Co-director Kurt Margenau assures us players still have to make important decisions about how to approach combat, whether that means choosing between stealth and combat or which kind of ammo you craft for your bow. "It's still a survival action game," Margenau says.

Speaking of bows, Margenau also confirmed arrow wounds are something players will want to deal with as soon as possible. "While [the arrow] is in you, you don't have access to listen mode and your aim is all out of whack," he says. "It's the first status effect we've introduced in the game."

Factions, the Last of Us' popular multiplayer mode that had players cultivate and maintain a clan of survivors over the course of 12 in-game weeks by playing various game modes, is returning in the sequel. Details about how the mode is changing are scant.

All of these changes and improvements serve to make The Last of Us Part II stand tall not only among Naughty Dog's catalog, but among the increasingly crowded release calendar, and we can't wait to see more. » ***Suriel Vazquez***

04

Super Smash Bros. Ultimate

Nintendo takes full advantage of its deep bench

Platform: *Switch* ***Style:*** *1 to 8-Player Fighting* ***Publisher:*** *Nintendo* ***Developer:*** *Bandai Namco, Sora, Ltd.* ***Release:*** *December 7*

Nintendo came out swinging at this year's E3, pummeling Nintendo Direct viewers with an almost overwhelming amount of information about what's ahead for the Super Smash Bros. series. The biggest takeaway? Super Smash Bros. Ultimate could truly live up to the lofty expectations its name sets up.

Characters have been introduced and retired over the years since Super Smash Bros. debuted, but Ultimate pulls them all back into the ring for one more bout. That's right – the Switch game contains every character that's been in the series since its Nintendo 64 debut, including Ice Climbers, Pichu, Pokémon Trainer, Snake, and Wolf, as well as DLC characters like Bayonetta, Ryu, and Cloud. In short, if you've played them before, they'll be in Ultimate – with more than 60 fighters in total.

Game director Masahiro Sakurai says the focus is on bringing all the familiar faces back, so players shouldn't expect to see a ton of new fighters. That's not to say the roster won't have some series rookies. Nintendo showed off two of the new brawlers, Ridley and Inkling. Ridley has been in Smash for years now in various forms, including as a boss in Brawl's Subspace Emissary mode, a collectible trophy in several entries, and as a background cameo in the first game. That hasn't been enough for Metroid fans, who've wanted to actually play as the dinosaur-like villain for years. He's not quite as large as you've seen him in the past, though he does grow larger for his final smash. His attacks include tail swipes and also incorporate his ability to breathe fire.

Inkling is a colorful addition to the cast, coating his or her rivals with gloppy blasts of damage-magnifying paint. You have a finite amount in your tanks, so you have to retreat and refill your supplies periodically. The inklings can coat the floor with rollers or blast enemies with their paint guns. The new Splatoon-themed stage, Moray Towers, is perfect for showing off the Inklings' squid abilities, allowing them to travel from one side to the other in a flash.

The development team isn't calling the game a port, and for good reason: There are tens of thousands of gameplay adjustments, enhancements, and revisions throughout nearly every facet of the game. Some of them are easy to spot – Mario can don his wedding and builder outfits from Super Mario Odyssey, and Link has the champion's tunic and remote bombs from

Each Inkling has its own ink color – imagine the mess in eight-way battles

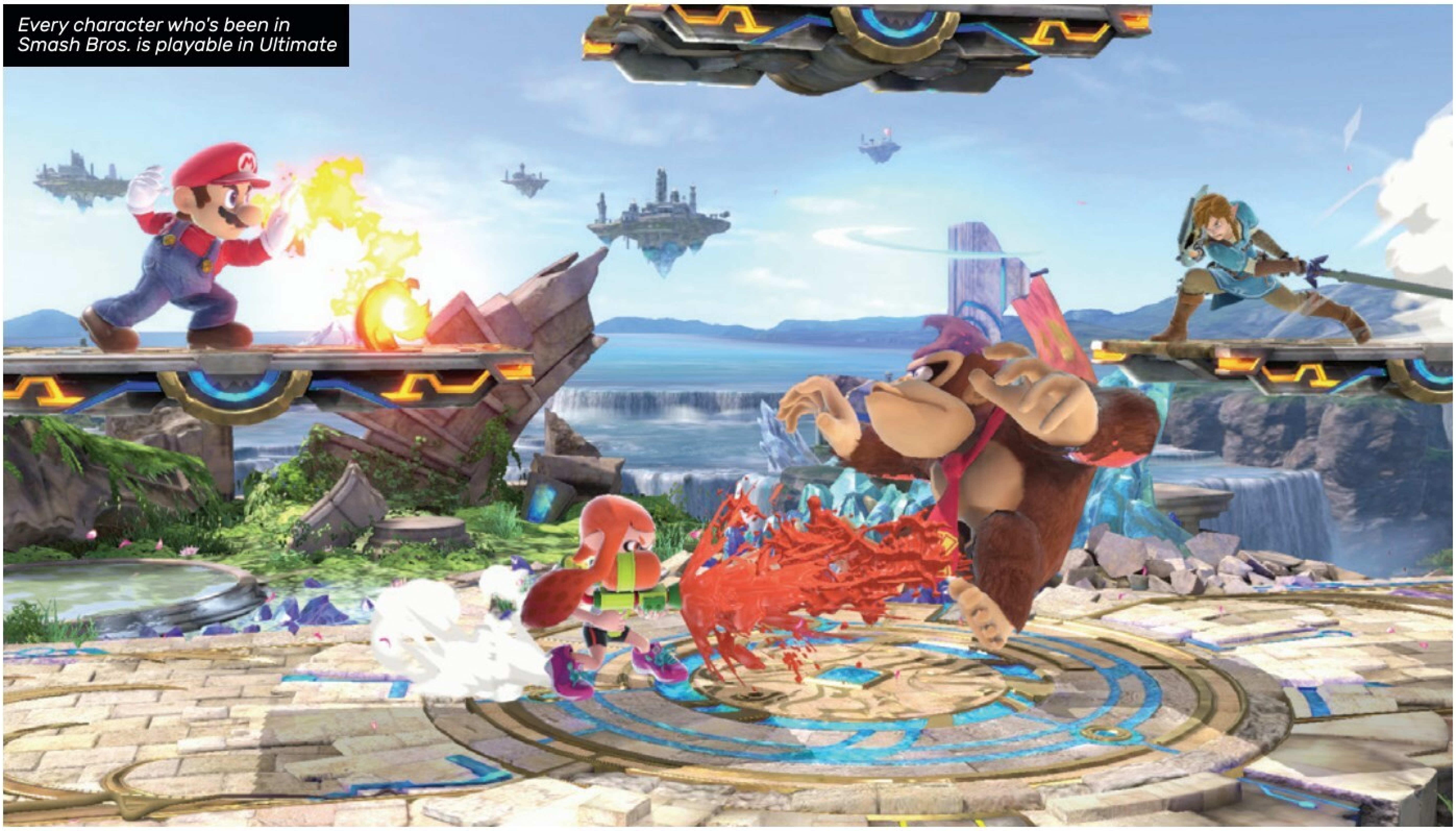
Breath of the Wild – while others are a bit more subtle. Dodge too much, and you'll become slightly more vulnerable. During one-on-one battles, players take a bit more damage to keep the matches reasonably paced. Directional air drops give players more mobility when recovering from falls. It's tough to say for certain how these individual changes affect the overall game – particularly until it gets in the hands of tournament-level players – but it's clear the team has been ambitious with Ultimate.

I played several four-player matches during the show, and it's as fun as ever. We all had Pro Controllers, but the game also supports GameCube controllers or, in a pinch, individual Joy-Cons. The Inkling is a solid new addition to the roster, and any fears I had of the paint being a limiting factor quickly washed away. The first battle took place in Saffron City, which hasn't been seen since the first Super Smash Bros. It looks significantly better than it did during its N64 debut – the team didn't just uprez the textures and call it a day – while still capturing the essence of the original. In one particularly clever touch, the door to one of the buildings still opens, and the Pokémon that emerge look like they did during their comparatively crude Nintendo 64 days.

Another bout took place in the Spirit Train stage, which is based on The Legend of Zelda: Spirit Tracks. Console-only players may not have experienced this one, as it was previously only available on the 3DS version of the last Smash Bros. game. The battle was hectic, but we did our best to keep our footing as the train lurched ahead while losing and gaining various cars. For this one, I picked Ness, to see how he compared to his previous incarnations. It was a familiar experience, and I didn't notice any jarring changes to how he plays. I annoyed my opponents with my PK Thunder, sniping at anyone who wasn't paying attention, and making judicious use of my d-pad taunts. I didn't get to pull off my ultimate attack, though I did fall victim to a smash-ball decoy; once I destroyed it, it burst open with an explosion and sent me flying off the train. Rude!

Great Plateau is a new stage based on Breath of the Wild, which has destructible elements. Other returning stages include Peach's Castle, New Pork City, Corneria, and Tortimer Island. We don't know how many stages are returning from past games, but the comprehensive nature of the character roster makes us optimistic.

We were left reeling from what we saw and played, as fans of the Smash Bros. series. It's going to be interesting to see how well-balanced the game is, particularly with powerful characters such as Bayonetta battling against characters that haven't been in the game for quite some time. We're curious to see how enthusiastically the pro community accepts the game. For the time being, we're happy that more Smash Bros. is on the horizon – even if Chibi-Robo inexplicably continues to sit out the festivities. **» *Jeff Cork***



Every character who's been in Smash Bros. is playable in Ultimate

05

Ghost Of Tsushima

Every frame is a painting in this samurai homage

Platform: PS4 **Style:** 1-Player Action **Publisher:** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer:** Sucker Punch Productions **Release:** TBA

The year is 1274. The Mongol Empire has invaded the quiet Japanese island of Tsushima. As the marauding army washes across the islands like relentless ocean waves, a lone warrior emerges from the chaos to fight for his freedom. Jin Sakai was trained in the honorable ways of the samurai, but as he watches his homeland erupt in flames, he realizes honorable tactics might not bring victory this time. The swordsman is forced to forge an unconventional fighting style – one that relies on clever guerrilla warfare and stealth – so Tsushima's last samurai adopts the Way of the Ghost.

For Sucker Punch's latest open-world action game, the studio has immersed itself in Asian history and the traditions of Japanese cinema. The studio is passionate about capturing nature's sublime beauty. The sun glints off rolling hills of amber grassland. A wall of trees ripple ominously as a storm approaches in the distance. Two warriors stand poised to strike amidst a field of red leaves. Ghost of Tsushima is filled with powerful images and cinematic moments. To better convey this cinematic tone, Sucker Punch is including the option for players to play through the entire game with Japanese voiceover.

"This is a game that is entirely grounded in reality," says Sucker Punch director Nate Fox. "We're trying hard to transport people to 1274 Japan. We're inspired by history, but we're not building it back stone by stone. We're not trying to rebuild Tsushima island, but our protagonist is a work of fiction. We actually thought about using some historical figures, and we asked some people who are more culturally aware than us, and they said that it would be insensitive, so we didn't do it."

Sucker Punch's E3 demo gave us a peek into Ghost of Tsushima's lively world. During one side mission, Jin teams up with an archer named Masako to save a tortured monk from a band of Mongols. During the E3 Demo, Sucker Punch removed the game's HUD, so we don't know exactly how the combat functions, but it seems to emphasize timing and counterattacking. During one encounter, Jin patiently waits for an opponent to charge forward before gracefully deflecting his strike and dispatching his foe in a single motion. One-on-one duels feel personal

Ghosts features a mix of stealth and action

Sucker Punch looked to the traditions of samurai films with building its open world

and epic thanks to the camera's slow pans around the battle.

Jin is also a silent assassin, and there are times where he won't want to make his presence known. At one point, he uses a grappling hook to quickly scale a shrine and get the drop on a group of enemies. This stealth attack triggers a slow-mo sequence in which Jin has extra time to line-up and execute multiple targets in quick succession. Sucker Punch wants all of Ghost of Tsushima's action to feel grounded, so the game accurately tracks every splatter of blood through the environment. Every battle leaves a mark on the world.

Sucker Punch built a name for itself telling fantastical stories about thieving raccoons and electrically charged superheroes, so this grounded historical setting feels outside of the studio's wheelhouse. However, based on everything we've seen so far, Ghost of Tsushima is absolutely stunning, and Sucker Punch promises that its version of Tsushima will be worth exploring.

"We believe heavily in this being an anthology of stories, where you'll see something on the horizon, like a town burning, or you'll meet a new character and then you'll head off on an adventure full of twists and turns," Fox says. "It all feels natural and organic. I want it to be something that feels bespoke and unexpected. My personal goal is that people get lost exploring feudal Japan." » ***Ben Reeves***

06

Resident Evil 2

A scary good remake

Platform: *PS4, Xbox One, PC* **Style:** *1-Player Action* **Publisher:** *Capcom* **Developer:** *Capcom* **Release:** *January 25*

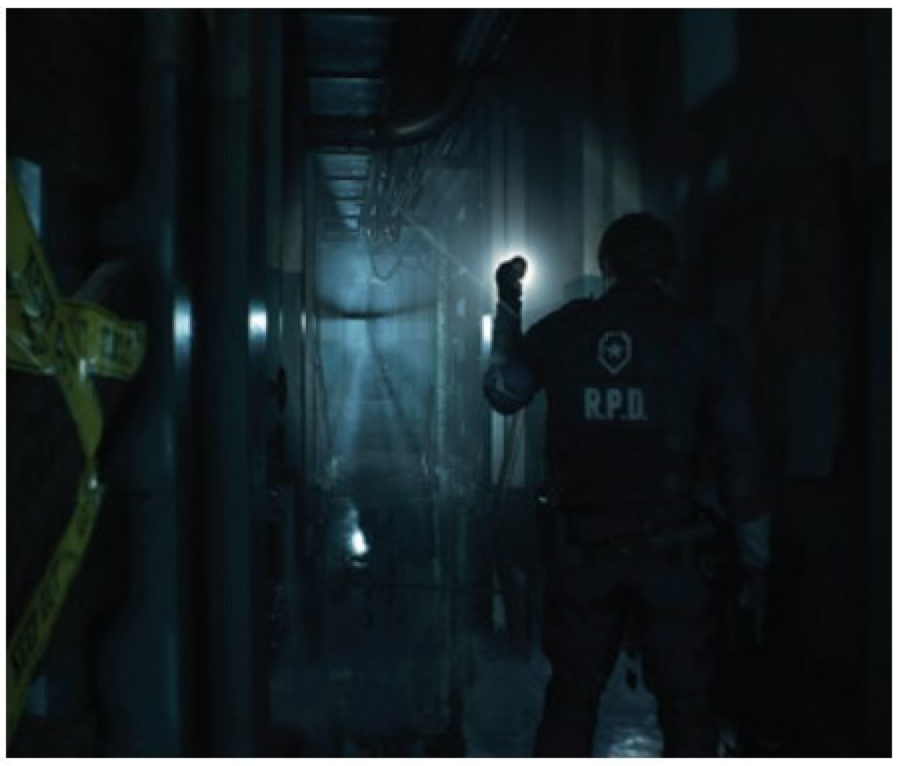
In 2002, Capcom completely rebuilt its original survival-horror experience for the GameCube. That reimaging of the zombie outbreak that rocked Raccoon City was more than a simple graphical overhaul – players were treated to a darker, more frightening game, and Capcom reworked most of the environments and puzzles to play on fan expectations. For years, those fans have been begging Capcom for a similar treatment of the second game, and in 2015 the company finally promised to deliver. Resident Evil 2 originally released on the PlayStation more than 20 years ago, which left fans with plenty of time to dream about this remake. But somehow, Capcom's E3 demo was better than I ever imagined.

One of the biggest changes to the game is a new behind-the-shoulder camera reminiscent of Resident Evils 4-6, but where Leon's adventure in Resident Evil 4 featured an emphasis on action, his rookie outing in the Resident Evil 2 remake returns to the series' survival-horror roots. Players generally have fewer enemies to deal with at any given time, but they also have a much more confined space to move about. Leon's reticle widens while walking and aiming, so his shots are less precise, but when players pause to take aim, this reticle slowly closes in on its target. I thought this feature might annoy me, but zombies move slowly enough that you have plenty of time to dial in your shots, and waiting to nail the perfect headshot ratchets up the tension.

"This over-the-shoulder survival horror is going to play into one of the other key pillars of the game, which is that the horror of the zombies is probably the highest that we've ever had in the series," says Capcom producer Yoshiaki Hirabayashi. "Because of the camera perspective, you get this intimate atmosphere. Whenever you come across a zombie, it's right up in your face. Right up close. Really terrifying."

Holding true to these classic survival-horror themes, players need to be mindful of their limited health and ammunition. Thankfully, the new map system helps players scout their environment. Not only does the map automatically fill out as you explore each area, it highlights points of interest and tags items – like first aid sprays – that you might have missed or couldn't carry your first time through. Rooms you have fully explored are highlighted blue, but rooms that still hold collectibles are highlighted red.

A few things have been lost in the process of remaking this classic. The original Resident Evil 2 featured two playable characters, Leon and Claire, and each character had a slightly different experience through the main story. What's more, players' actions with one character would alter their experience the second time around with the other hero. Capcom called this feature the zapping system, and it won't be returning for the remake. However, the developers have designed two wholly separate campaigns for both Leon and Claire. Players should recognize many of the locations from the original game, but they might take a slightly new path through each area.



"The zapping system was definitely innovative at the time, and it has its pros and cons," Hirabayashi says. "But it also introduced a lot of repetitiveness where to see everything you had to retrace a lot of steps … We're trying to respect the original game while pushing it forward in terms of available technology and hardware. We're taking a well-loved title and we're saying, 'How can we bring an experience that will allow today's players to feel the same as people did 20 years ago?'"

If Resident Evil 7 was a bold new direction for the series, then the Resident Evil 2 remake is a bold new take on a classic formula. Capcom has updated its graphics and controls for a modern audience and managed to make the game scarier in the process, but fans of the original exploration-based survival action shouldn't be scared to make this return to Raccoon City. » ***Ben Reeves***

Anthem

Explosive combat complexity

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PC **Style:** Online Multiplayer Shooter **Publisher:** Electronic Arts **Developer:** BioWare **Release:** February 22

In last month's issue of *Game Informer*, we dove deep into Anthem, delivering 14-pages of hands-on impressions, story details, and insight from the development team at BioWare. At this year's EA Play press conference, BioWare general manager Casey Hudson took the stage to double down on his team's commitment to create "a whole new world of story and characters," but couldn't escape a specter of the past that crept into the footage. When discussing just how dynamic the customization options in Anthem are, the audience in attendance roared in approval when a black, N7-themed javelin appeared on screen.

This fun little nod to commander Shepard reminded me of seeing Mass Effect for the first time at Microsoft's X press conference in Amsterdam in 2005. In Mass Effect's debut trailer, before any footage was shown, the BioWare logo appeared along with the message "The developer of legendary RPGs of the past brings you a spectacular RPG of the future."

Flash forward 13 years, and we find ourselves at a similar point in time, with fans not wanting to let go of BioWare's past, demanding similar storytelling, player choice, and romance options. But the studio has already moved on, and is eager to share its new approach to RPG game design. After spending 20 minutes playing Anthem, I can confidently say BioWare has a firm grasp on sophisticated, twitch-based combat and maneuverability. My concerns of the developer leaving its comfort zone quickly melted away as the battlefield exploded with action and the world opened up to me. This demo left me wanting more, not from the story or characters, but the flight mechanics, boss fights, world exploration, and explosive arsenal.

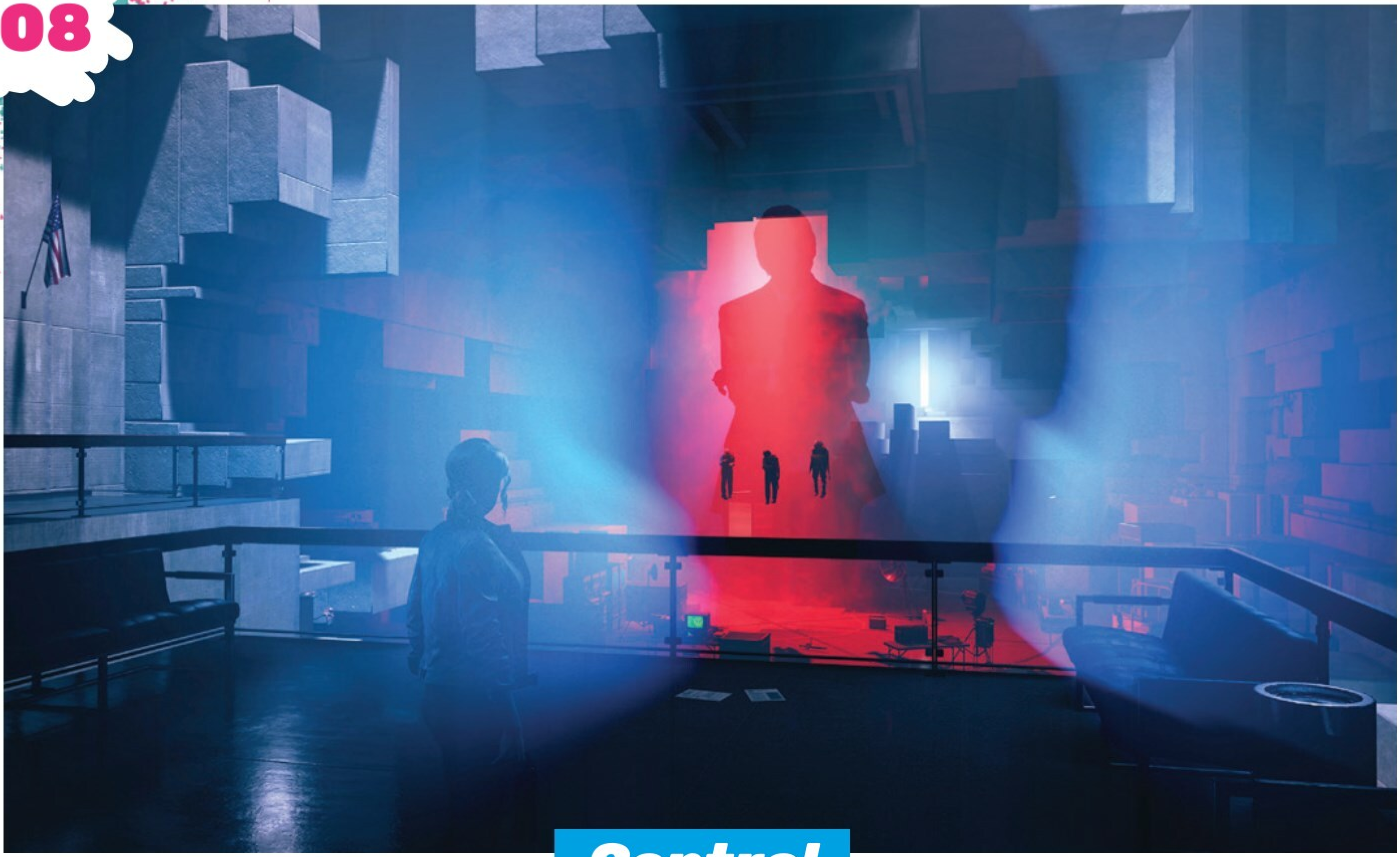
The javelin controls are surprisingly complex, almost like a jet fighter from a World War II flight game was mashed together with the traditional control scheme found in most first- and third-person shooters. After hitting the jump button, I expected my javelin to take flight, but it instead returned to the ground with a loud "clank." I quickly learned that to take flight, I needed to jump and then press in the left analog stick to ignite the thrusters. My javelin rocketed forward through a waterfall and into a cave with flames shooting out of its heels. Pressing up on the left analog stick increases the throttle, but also caused the thrusters to overheat faster. A meter shows just how much juice you can give the thrusters before you must land (or fly through water) to cool them down. While in flight, the right analog stick controls movement. You can also tap a button to transition to a hover, which is great for aerial combat. From this high vantage point, you can look down your gun's sights, just like any other shooter, but again, you need to keep an eye on the overheat meter.

In combat, I quickly got into a rhythm of using hover to rain down death, and flight to quickly reposition myself on the battlefield. The real trick is managing that thruster cooldown so you don't find yourself flatfooted on the ground at the wrong times. Reading attack patterns is crucial in figuring out just when to take to the skies. This is where Anthem takes on a life of its own as a shooter. Most of the battles in this demo take place in wide-open areas that allow for ease of maneuverability. While enemy ground troops are at a great disadvantage against you and your three human-controlled teammates, snipers on the ridge and automated turrets complicate the aerial approach. Again, this is where strategy comes into play. I communicated with my teammates to take care of the turrets and snipers before engaging the heavily armed forces in the valley.

The demo, which concluded with a lengthy boss fight against a spider that can soak up damage, successfully sells BioWare's vision of combat. It also shows just how exciting, intense, and rewarding this new action formula can be. How it wedges into open-world exploration and storytelling remain to be seen, but with the February 22 release date fast approaching, we don't have long to wait to see if BioWare's gamble on leaving the past behind pays off.

» *Andrew Reiner*

08



Control

Remedy returns to bend minds

Platform: *PS4, Xbox One, PC* ***Style:*** *1-Player Action (Multiplayer TBA)* ***Publisher:*** *505 Games* ***Developer:*** *Remedy Entertainment* ***Release:*** *2019*

After two years of silence following the 2016 release of Quantum Break, Remedy Entertainment finally revealed its new project at E3. Control casts you into a world created to defy expectations, where dream logic prevails, and players are given reasons to explore deeper than any Remedy game before.

Best known for games like Max Payne and Alan Wake, Remedy has always focused on stylish action. However, thanks to the studio's creative approach to storytelling, it's garnered a reputation for linear experiences that put narrative first. The team hopes to change that perception with Control.

"We wanted to, first and foremost, create a deep and mysterious world – a many-layered world that players would be drawn back to even when they have played for a long time to explore, find secrets, and piece things together," says creative director Sam Lake.

You control Jesse Faden, a person in search of answers about a traumatic encounter with the unexplainable. Her journey takes her to a Manhattan skyscraper known as The Oldest House, which serves as the headquarters of the shadowy government organization known as Federal Bureau of Control. The FBC's job is to investigate occurrences and creatures unexplainable by human science or understanding. Just as Jesse arrives, the Bureau comes under attack by a supernatural force known as The Hiss.

The Hiss possess all FBC employees and kill the director. Jesse picks up a gun to defend herself, not realizing it belonged to the director. By picking it up, she assumes the role of director at the Bureau, immediately putting a target on her back. This weapon is an object of power, capable of shifting forms and changing firing modes. In one case, the gun morphs horizontally to blast a spread of bullets, catching multiple enemies at once.

The gun isn't the only one with powers. From being able to lift parts of the floor to use as a shield, then push it at enemies to stun them, to quickly lifting objects from across the room to smash into enemies, Jesse has her own arsenal of moves. Along the way, she learns new powers like levitation, allowing her to access new areas. Both Jesse's gun and powers can be upgraded, adding myriad opportunities to build a character that suits your playstyle.

The Oldest House is no ordinary building. Around every turn is a new surprise: rooms that shift before your very eyes, seemingly bottomless pits, doors that lead to other locations like motels, and even astral planes. Control is heavily influenced by "new weird," a subgenre of science fiction where a normal world is influenced by a supernatural, foreign force to create unexplainable, incomprehensible occurrences.

"It's a place of power on its own … this weird, shifting, strange place that's vastly bigger on the inside than the outside would lead you to believe," Lake says. "If you know the rules, if the conditions are right, if you know the right rituals, you can keep on traveling – essentially forever – deeper into this building. And step by step, also, leaving our known reality behind."

Players must think outside the box to progress. By participating in puzzle-like abstract rituals, Jesse can access new areas. The ritual I witnessed involved pulling a light switch in a particular manner to completely morph a hallway into another area. I can't imagine how complicated these rituals get.

Control feels like the ultimate realization of what Remedy has attempted in previous games. "I would like to think that with each project, we learn what works and what didn't work that well," Lake says. "We always want to bring in new elements and try out new things. Here, I think we've done a bit more of that than times in the past."

The open structure, the powers Jesse wields, and the abstract shifting building lead to a complex title difficult to wrap your head around. Control hopes to keep players on their toes more than other Remedy games, and I can't wait to see how the studio intends to accomplish that. **» *Brian Shea***

Assassin's Creed Odyssey

09

Ubisoft bets big on RPG elements

Platform: *PS4, Xbox One, PC* **Style:** *1-Player Action* **Publisher:** *Ubisoft* **Developer:** *Ubisoft Quebec* **Release:** *October 5*

Sometimes you want to plan the perfect assassination, lurking patiently in the shadows for your target to make the wrong move. And then there are times when you just want to kick a dude off a cliff. Assassin's Creed Odyssey is aimed at giving players the freedom to play how they want, whether that means prioritizing stealth, wielding the biggest club on the block, or simply turning into the ultimate Spartan kicker.

Ubisoft Quebec's latest game builds off the series' revamped foundation, which was laid in last year's Assassin's Creed Origins. The game again has a greater focus on action-based combat as opposed to the more reactive, counter-based fights from past games, but the Quebec team is working to give players more overall choice in the game – including your gear and skills loadout, the character you play as, and the decisions he or she makes throughout the campaign.

Odyssey is set in ancient Greece, about 400 years before the events of Origins. You play as a mercenary from Sparta trying to overcome a family tragedy. You can choose to play as Alexios or Kassandra, but the decision is primarily cosmetic. Unlike Ubisoft Quebec's previous AC game, Assassin's Creed Syndicate, which featured twins Jacob and Evie Frye, Alexios and Kassandra are blank slates for the player. You aren't limiting yourself in a particular style of gameplay, such as being stealthy or combat oriented depending on who you pick, and you aren't cutting off any potential romantic conquests either.

That's right – the emphasis on player choice extends to romance options, if you're into those kinds of things. Some conversational trees can lead to amorous encounters, just as you can choose to take an aggressive approach during conversations or lie. Ubisoft is putting an emphasis on the "role" part of RPG, giving players the option to play as the kind of Assassin's Creed hero they want.

The naval component that was fully blown out in Black Flag is back in Odyssey, though you're obviously not sailing galleons. You still have a crew, and this time out you can take more of an active role in managing it. As you voyage across the Mediterranean, you can recruit lieutenants to accompany you on your journey, either through force, coercion, or a shared thirst for adventure. These lieutenants also have special passive abilities, such as giving your rowing crew more stamina for bursts of speed at sea, or allowing your archers to fire off more arrows with every volley.

Odyssey is reminiscent of Origins from a core systems standpoint, but the deeper RPG elements and gorgeous new setting make for a satisfyingly fresh feeling overall. We're definitely eager to learn more in the next few months, particularly on how Greek mythology is woven throughout the journey. Once thing's for certain, however: Odyssey is allowing players to shape their own stories with new levels of freedom.

» *Jeff Cork*

10

Battlefield V

Fighting a war on two fronts

Platform: *PS4, Xbox One, PC* **Style:** *1-Player Shooter (64-Player Online)* **Publisher:** *Electronic Arts* **Developer:** *DICE* **Release:** *October 19*

EA just couldn't help itself. With more and more shooters chasing the white hot battle royale trend Fortnite is currently dominating, the mega-publisher had to join the fray, announcing a Battlefield-themed version during its E3 press conference. We know nothing about how DICE plans to put its signature stamp on the mode, but we do have a better idea of how the studio is reinforcing squad play in its own destination multiplayer modes.

E3 marked the first time we got our hands on the new Grand Operations, an evolution of the Operations mode introduced in Battlefield 1. Instead of just swapping maps halfway through, this time DICE plans to incorporate various modes into the sequential rounds of the long-form matches as well. For our play session, the attackers start by parachuting behind enemy lines to take out artillery in the first round, then transition into a classic control point tug-of-war experience for the second round.

I played rounds on both sides of the war to get a better understanding of all the new tools DICE gives soldiers in Battlefield V. Dropping in as an Allied paratrooper is nerve-wracking when the artillery is firing in your direction. You can wait to time your drop further behind enemy lines, but this comes at the cost of potentially going down with the cargo plane if the Axis soldiers take aim and fire. If you drop early you won't face the same dire circumstance, but the Axis is in much better position to repel your advances.

Once you land, you need a soldier to gather the charges necessary for detonating the artillery; you can't just walk up and destroy them without grabbing the explosives like you would an M-COM station in Rush mode.

When I switched to the defensive side, I familiarized myself with the new fortification system available to all classes. Each soldier has a hammer they can equip to fortify their position. Once the tool is out, you can see outlines of potential building options around you. One area may allow you to throw down some sandbags, while another may create a thicker wall to give forward defenders better cover. Engineers can also build stationary weapon emplacements. This system is much more restrained than I expected; you won't be crafting dramatic defensive positions like Fortnite.

The fortification system and more modest amount of starting ammo both change the rhythm of play. When you clear out one set of advancing soldiers and have a minute, it's smart to reinforce your position or run back to an ammo supply point to stock up. You have enough clips to take out a few soldiers, but I found myself running out of bullets way more than in previous Battlefield games. Requesting that a squad member drop ammo bags wherever you set up is a smart call. The same goes for medic packs considering you no longer regenerate full health by staying out of the crossfire.

It's tough to get a full assessment of general gameplay during such brief hands-on sessions, but most of the changes left a good first impression. The reinforced squad play seems promising, the destructibility looks more realistic, and the recalibrated guns feel much more predictable once you figure out their characteristics. This all adds up to make Battlefield V one of our most anticipated shooters of the year – even without battle royale. » ***Matt Bertz***

11

Kingdom Hearts III

More worlds, more surprises

Platform: *PS4, Xbox One* **Style:** *1-Player Role-Playing* **Publisher:** *Square Enix* **Developer:** *Square Enix* **Release:** *January 29*

This year's E3 was full of Kingdom Hearts fanfare. Whether it was the long lines to play the highly anticipated sequel or the trailer reactions heard around the internet, Kingdom Hearts III had a big presence at this year's show – a nice change of pace, considering its absence in prior years. Before the show, Square Enix finally set a release date of January 29, pushing it out of its original 2018 target. At the very least, Square Enix made sure to give fans enough new info to tide them over for the slight delay.

Two worlds were announced at E3, one brand new and one returning. Frozen debuts in Kingdom Hearts, showcasing Elsa struggling with her powers hurting people and being torn between accepting the Light or Darkness. Her sister Anna also makes an appearance, complete with talking snowman Olaf and Sami iceman Kristoff. Sora comes equipped with an ice keyblade with vicious attacks that slice through enemies and freeze them. The wintry world also lets Sora slide on ice (similar to Dream Drop Distance's flow motion) and introduces us to Goofy Curling, with Sora, Goofy, and Donald riding on top of curling stones, frantically avoiding obstacles.

The returning world is Pirates of the Caribbean, but this time around, Sora can engage in ship battles, firing cannons at other ships. Director Tetsuya Nomura says he has a good reason to bring the pirate life back. "For Kingdom Hearts III, I wanted to do at least one live-action movie," he says. "That's because this is our first full-volume title on the current generation consoles, so I wanted to test our limits in how real we can make it."

Even with all of the world reveals, Nomura confirms there's still more in the game we have yet to see. "We don't have many left, but we do have some left, including our original worlds," he says. He also spoke to the fact that while Big Hero 6 was announced, it has yet to be shown off.

While the worlds were certainly a hot topic during E3, nothing surpassed the reaction to the new footage that showed Aqua turning to the Darkness. Aqua has been a notable character in the series for her selflessness, but even Nomura wasn't expecting the fan reaction to be so intense. "We had that scene with Aqua in that announcement of Frozen, and I was actually just surprised that there was the same or more buzz surrounding Aqua, because Frozen was supposed to be the big reveal," he explains. "I was just surprised when people were surprised she had fallen to the Darkness. I, of course, know the entirety of the storyline, so in fact, there are more surprises and some even bigger than that. I just wonder if everyone will be okay."

So far Kingdom Hearts III has been all spectacle, with flashy keyblade transformations and fun Disney-attraction attacks. Story beats have been scarce, but we're getting closer to finding out how the Xehanort arc ends. Nomura has said before that we'd be surprised who's on the side of Light and who's on the side of Darkness. The E3 Aqua reveal made that even more apparent. **» *Kimberley Wallace***

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Shadow Of The Tomb Raider

Lara gives her foes something to truly fear

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PC **Style:** 1-Player Action **Publisher:** Square Enix **Developer:** Eidos Montreal, Crystal Dynamics **Release:** September 14

Shadow of the Tomb Raider wraps up a trilogy of games that focus on Lara Croft's origins, from a plucky archaeologist who struggles to kill a deer to a seasoned explorer with a body count that would make even Nathan Drake flinch. We got a chance to play the upcoming game in a behind-closed-doors demo that emphasized combat – including a particularly sadistic new tool.

The demo drops us in a Peruvian rainforest. We're not alone, and we can hear nearby patrols warning one another that Lara is in the area. Wherever this mission takes place in the overall storyline, one thing's clear: Our reputation precedes us. We wouldn't want to disappoint anyone, so we scamper up a nearby tree and scope out the surrounding area.

Below, three paramilitary goons do their best to secure the trail. They're armed with rifles, and dropping down and attempting to take them on face-to-face seems suicidal. Instead, Lara nocks an arrow, takes aim, and fires at the neck of her closest victim. Ordinarily, the target would slump to the ground, dead, and his comrades would begin to search for whoever shot him. It wasn't an ordinary arrow, however. Moments after being shot, the effects of the fear arrow take hold. The victim starts to freak out, firing at his friends. Confused, they shoot back. In a matter of seconds, the victim has killed his friends before succumbing to the toxin.

It's a fun little trick, one we continue to employ as Lara works her way closer to the main camp. Some enemies are wearing armor, which makes them resistant to the tactic. Fortunately, there's still room to improvise. We find a fuel can and drop it into a cluster of heavily outfitted soldiers. They instinctively fire on the source of the sound, their impulsive shots detonating the container. Most are killed in the explosion, and I leap onto a survivor from my perch, knife ready.

Once the soldiers are taken out, Lara ventures into a refinery for a particularly explosive traversal section. It's a frantic chase through an industrial zone, while an attack helicopter and a variety of soldiers fire on our position. True to the rebooted series, Lara can't take anything for granted as she navigates the rapidly crumbling structures. Catwalks twist and collapse, and it seems as though death is inevitable with every acrobatic leap.

The demo ends with her plunging into the water below, but she isn't down for long. She rises like a phoenix – with a wall of fire behind her, in case the metaphor wasn't obvious enough – fully prepared to rain hell down on her enemies. It's an explosive ending for a demo that left us wanting more. Fortunately, we won't have long to wait. **» Jeff Cork**

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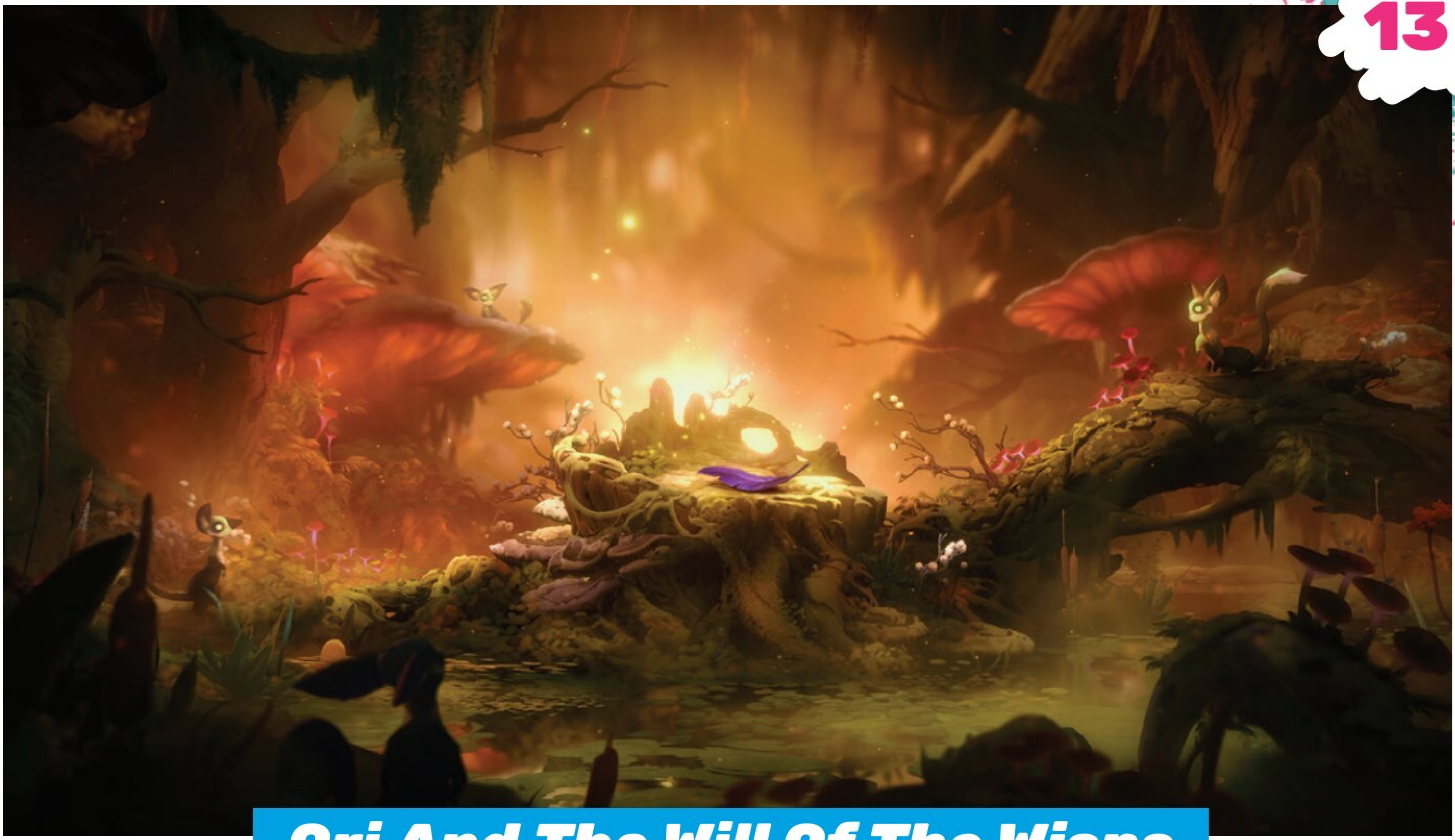

Ori And The Will Of The Wisps

Leaving the forest

Platform: *Xbox One, PC* ***Style:*** *1-Player Platforming* ***Publisher:*** *Microsoft Studios* ***Developer:*** *Moon Studios* ***Release:*** *2019*

During a console generation where Microsoft has come under sustained fire about its lack of compelling exclusive titles, the publisher has had one surprising success: Ori and The Blind Forest. The platformer's rave reviews and strong sales all but guaranteed it would receive a sequel, which was revealed during E3 2017. A year later, we got to play Ori and The Will of the Wisps for ourselves to see if it captures the magic of its predecessor. The answer? A resounding yes.

The demo we played had us guiding our old friend Ori through a new, dusty setting called The Windswept Wastes. The powerful imagery that captured the imaginations of players of the previous game is still here, with beautiful details like coiled branches sticking out of the soil. Ori's slick movements made us feel like we were playing a '90s Disney-style cartoon.

However, Moon Studios isn't resting on its platforming laurels. A revised combat system makes the action in Will of the Wisps much more dynamic, giving players access to a slew of energy-based weapons including a staff, bow, and hammer. These attacks are frantic and fluid, with Ori zipping across stages to zap foes in proper cartoony style. Don't think our cute character's new arsenal will help him lay waste to foes with ease, though.

The enemies in Will of the Wisps are vicious and difficult, as they're often just as fast as Ori himself. A particularly nasty sandworm requires you to burrow into its nesting ground to avoid it or, if you're skilled enough, to lure it out into the open so you can blast it to pieces with a volley of arrows. As with The Blind Forest, the environment is often just as deadly as the foes, with spike pits and death traps awaiting at every turn, forcing you to master Ori's abilities to survive. Luckily, more than enough-health restoration points are around for you to use if you take a handful of falls. Outside of combat and traversal improvements, Will of the Wisp's world also feels more alive, with NPCs littering the place, some of them with helpful maps and items for you to purchase.

We came away impressed with how Will of the Wisps is shaping up. Moon Studios isn't reinventing the wheel here, but it also isn't settling for more of the same, providing more tactical and combat options while doubling down on what really worked for the first game: energetic traversal and astounding visuals.

» *Javy Gwaltney*

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Rage 2

Going wild in the sun

Platform: *PS4, Xbox One, PC* **Style:** *1-Player Action*
Publisher: *Bethesda Softworks* **Developer:** *Avalanche Studios*
Release: *2019*

What do you get when you take the developer that basically invented the first-person shooter and combine it with a developer that's built a renowned reputation of creating wacky open-world games? Rage 2. At least, that's what Bethesda is saying. We recently got the chance to check out this surprise sequel, being developed jointly by id Software and Avalanche Studios, to see how it's shaping up.

The demo we played focused primarily on close-quarters combat, letting us use protagonist Walker's nanorite abilities to fling foes across the map with telekinetic powers and slam the ground with powerful stomps that reduced them to a fine red paste. The gunplay was satisfying, with shotgun blasts sounding powerful and blowing enemies into the wall with incredible force, and the assault rifle functioning as a bullet-spewing jackhammer. Everything we played gave credence to the notion that on a basic, combat-focused level, Rage 2 should be very satisfying to play.

However, it's worth noting that we didn't see any of the open-world elements during the demo, which is a big deal given that the open-world is at least half of the mixture that Bethesda, id, and Avalanche are touting so heavily in their collective messaging. Will that fantastic combat work well in open spaces, given that so much of id Software's gunplay is often in tight, contained corridors and chambers? There's no way to know until Bethesda shows off more of that playground, but for now, the wacky, gory combat is enticing enough to make us excited for whatever wild combination these two studios are engendering. » ***Javy Gwaltney***

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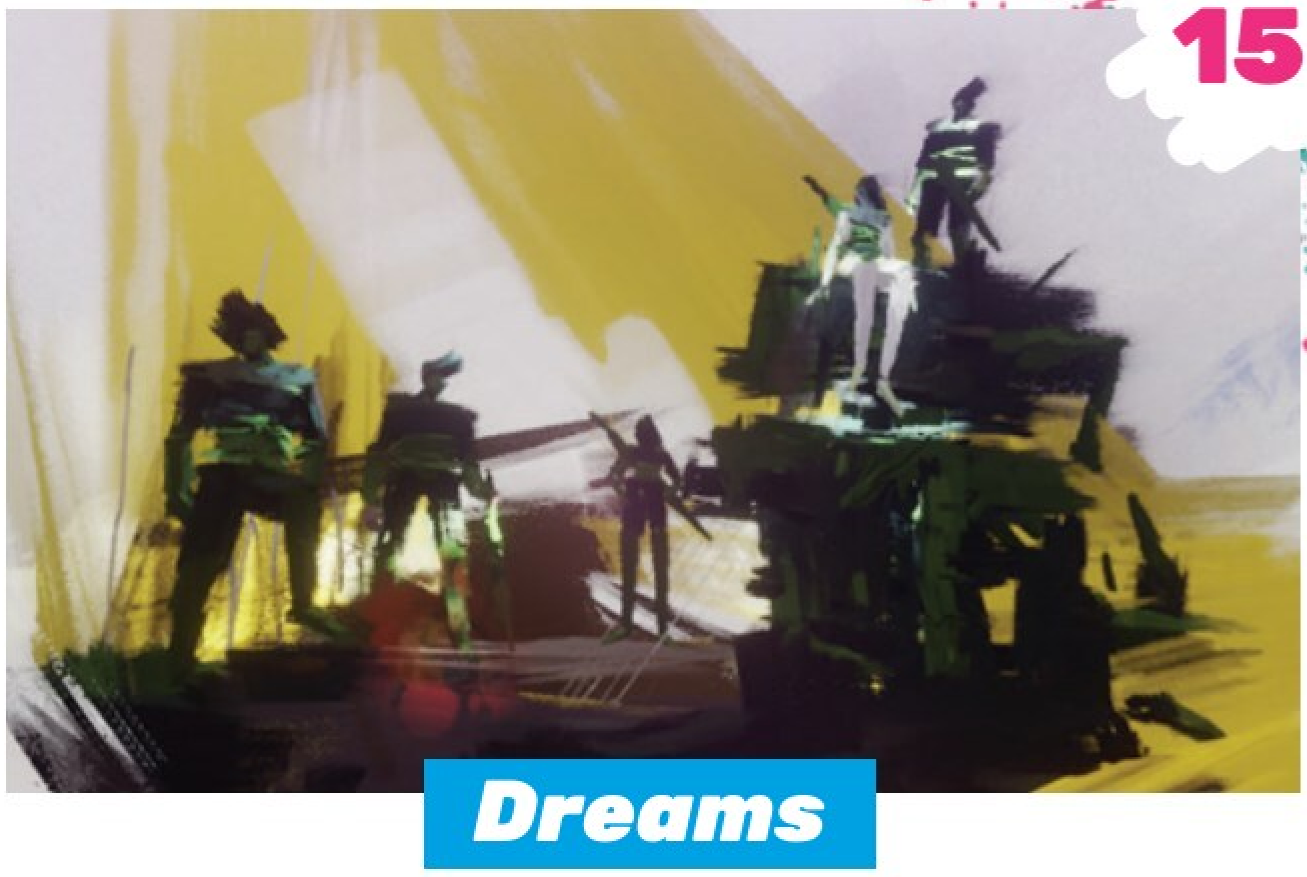

Dreams

Making your wildest dreams come true

Platform: *PS4* **Style:** *1-Player Action*
Publisher: *Sony Interactive Entertainment*
Developer: *Media Molecule* **Release:** *2018*

Media Molecule's Dreams is a game engine disguised as a video game. That doesn't mean Dreams isn't fun. Tinkering with Dream's suite of creation tools is highly rewarding, and I found it incredibly easy to bring an idea to life with only a bit of work. Media Molecule envisions its oddball project will act like a sketchpad for would-be game makers, and the studio hopes users will create everything from full-length experiences to bite-sized micro games.

Even if you're not a creator, Dreams offers a wealth of content. Much like LittleBigPlanet, Media Molecule has designed a campaign that guides players through some of the things that are possible with its creation tools. This campaign is basically a series of short stories that have players platforming and solving puzzles in colorful science-fiction, fantasy, and film-noir worlds.

Over the course of time, player-created content should provide users with a virtually endless stream of game scenarios to play. Players can even tag their content, so if you are in the mood for a specific experience, you can search for tags like "horror" or "platforming" and Dreams will create a playlist of content ranging from micro games to interactive movies. You can also use other players' content as a template to begin building your own dreams. In a matter of minutes, I took a field full of flowers and dragged in new objects, animated creatures, and stretched the environment into a nightmarish hellscape with a red sky.

Calling Dreams a collection of creation tools sounds drab, but these tools feel like the most intricate set of Legos ever created. Dreams was one of the first games announced for PlayStation 4 back when the hardware was revealed in 2013, but Media Molecule has taken its time to make sure every aspect of the game is user friendly. When this project finally releases later this year, it should be something special.
» ***Ben Reeves***

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Generation Zero

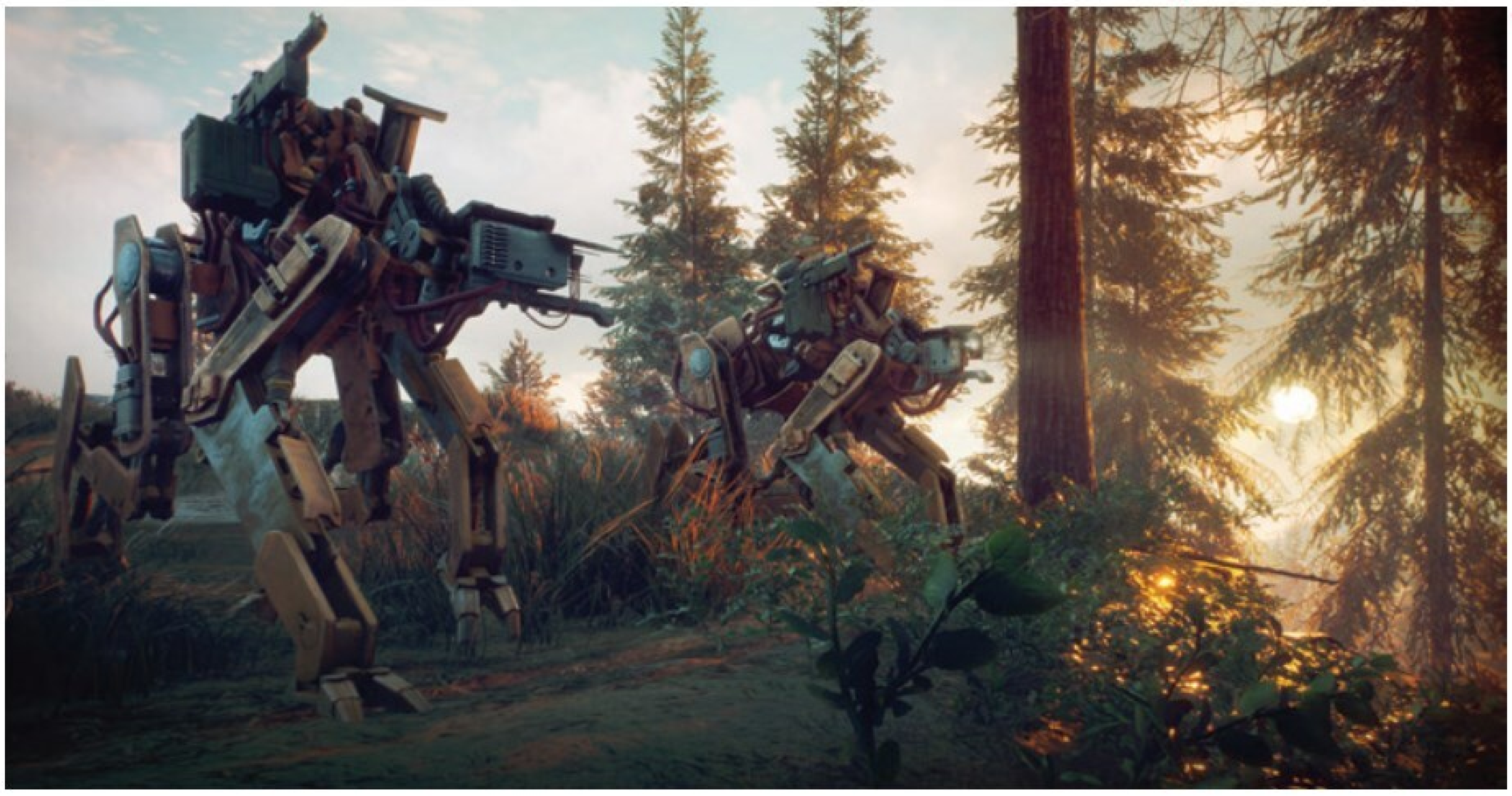
Canceling the apocalypse

Platform: *PS4, Xbox One, PC* ***Style:*** *1-Player Action (4-Player Online)* ***Publisher:*** *Avalanche Studios* ***Developer:*** *Avalanche Studios* ***Release:*** *2019*

This is a big year for Avalanche Studios. Hot on the heels of the developer announcing both a sequel to id Software's Rage and Just Cause 4, the developer revealed a new self-published IP being quietly created by a team of 40 people called Generation Zero. Set in Sweden in the '80s, you'll find no traces of neon on the foggy landscapes you navigate – just robots. Deadly, vicious robots.

Generation Zero's alternate timeline finds you (and three other players) investigating sleepy towns littered across the land in search of a reason behind this sudden H.G. Wells-like invasion, looting cars and houses for weapons and ammo, and using your wits to stay alive. The demo played out a like a strange but alluring combination of Left 4 Dead and Sweden's answer to S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl, with eerie, deserted roads patrolled by various robots capable of tearing you to shreds. To take them on, you have to use your wits.

Every robot has specially designated parts on their bodies. Shoot a part that has a function and that function ceases. So, for example, you can disable a robot's motor abilities by shooting its legs or disable night vision by putting a bullet through its scope. This makes working together intense, with players capable of springing traps to take down enemies by targeting their weaknesses.

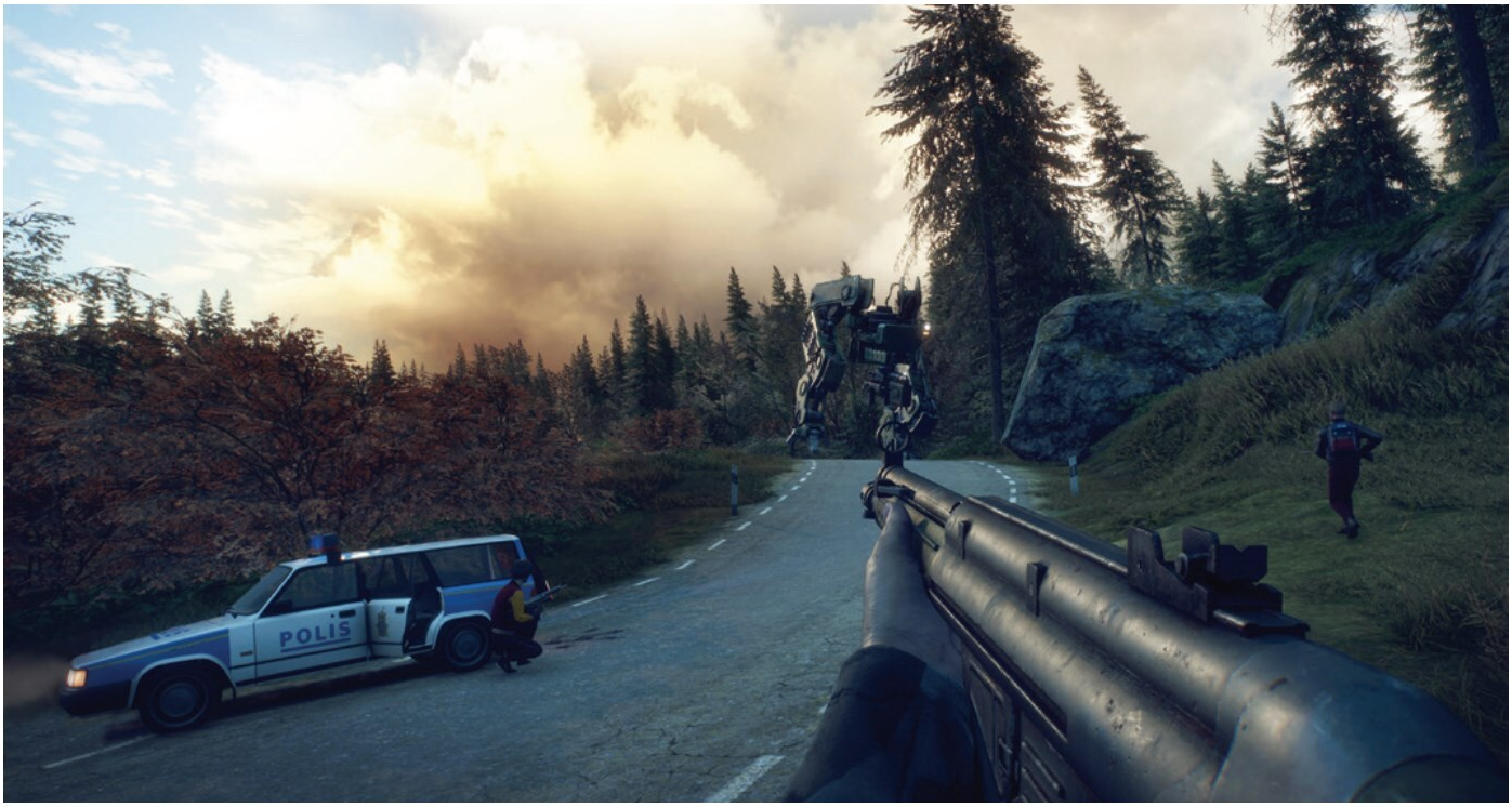


According to Avalanche, the entire world of Generation Zero is open to everyone in the game, meaning players aren't tethered to each other by arbitrary rope. You could feasibly go to one area of the world and the other player could go to the other end without restriction. This was most interesting during our demo when the players split up to go take care of separate objectives during a mission to find a bunker in a small town. In the distance, we could hear the other player taking on robots thanks to the pop pop pop...

What's most impressive about Generation Zero is how immersive and unique its world is. Every town was filled with buildings that players could access to search for equipment or use as shelter during combat. The sense of desolation and loneliness, as fog swept across the road hinting at the danger ahead, was all-encompassing and sells the mystery of this robotic threat.

Generation Zero is due out sometime next year, and though it might not be as loud or renowned as either Just Cause or Rage, this new outing from Avalanche Studios is filled with promise, and we eagerly anticipate repelling this spooky invasion with our friends.

» *Javy Gwaltney*



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Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice

A sublime and stealthy surprise

Platform: PS4, Xbox One **Style:** 1-Player Action (Online TBA) **Publisher:** Activision **Developer:** From Software **Release:** 2019

Back in December 2017, From Software got the hearts of gamers the world over beating with a short, grisly teaser that many were convinced was an indication Bloodborne 2 was on the way. After several months of rumors, From and Activision pulled off the cover to reveal that the game was not the sequel to that Lovecraftian action masterpiece, but instead something new and less Souls-like than you might expect.

Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice is an action-adventure game that takes place in a fantasy version of feudal japan and follows the plight of one samurai to rescue his lord from the forces of evil and get revenge on the enemy who sliced off his hand. Though Sekiro definitely channels the dark fantasy elements of both Dark Souls and Bloodborne, From Software is adamant this is not a Souls game. They've got gameplay to back up that statement, too.

Our short demo consists of our unnamed hero infiltrating a snowy castle. His prosthetic hand functions as a trick gadget, with one of the accessories being a Tenchu-like grapple the demoer uses to clamber up to a rooftop to survey the area and foes within. The demo immediately sets the tone that this isn't a Souls experience, with our hero creeping around a beautiful, lit up environment with snow falling on dojos as he leaps down to drive his katana through the throat of a foe, killing him instantly. The dead man's companions turn to face the protagonist, and that's when things get frantic.

The place where you can see the biggest bits of From Software's DNA are in the combat. Parries and dodging are still king here, requiring you to memorize enemy patterns to defeat your rivals. However, your prosthetic hand also gives you multiple avenues to victory, like the ability to switch to a hand axe that rips through an enemy's shield or even a flamethrower that stuns foes, letting you lay into them. The action is less fantasy and more derivative of classic samurai films like *Throne Of Blood* and *Lone Wolf and Cub*, with every final blow resulting in a satisfying spray of blood that taints the surrounding area. The fights seem more tactical, and you need to measure when it's best to strike a blow, as opposed to just rolling around, looking for an opening.

After this combat sequence, the demoer resumes his stealthily approach, hopping into a wrecked tower and sneaking through beautiful, polished hallways. At one point the protagonist waits around a corner as an old woman holding a lantern approaches. He swiftly swings out of the corner and stealthily stabs her. "She can call enemy reinforcements," From Software's representative explains.

A few seconds later, the hero hops down to take on what looks like a giant troll flanked by two enemies. In no time at all, the troll smashes the protagonist to bits. However, in a quick surprise to anyone who's played the Souls games, the hero immediately resurrects, taking the three foes by surprise and killing them all. From Software says it wasn't explaining the mechanic yet, but that it allows for players to "fake" their own deaths to orchestrate traps for enemies.

Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice is not Bloodborne 2, and while fans may take that as an occasion to mourn the borne, we're eagerly intrigued to see From Software's latest depart from the familiar formula to take new, bold creative measures in this sword-slinging adventure.

» Javy Gwaltney

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Call Of Duty: Black Ops 4

Bold and divisive maneuvers

Platform: *PS4, Xbox One, PC* ***Style:*** *Online Multiplayer Shooter* ***Publisher:*** *Activision* ***Developer:*** *Treyarch* ***Release:*** *October 12*

For years now, "Call of Duty never changes" has been the motto of the series' detractors. With Black Ops 4, Treyarch and Activision are looking to challenge that criticism in a fittingly bombastic way by nuking single-player and going all in on redesigned multiplayer, zombies, and battle royale modes. While these changes are sure to rattle and divide Call of Duty's fanbase, we found the new multiplayer setup to be a refreshing change of pace that borrows more than a little from the likes of fellow Activision property Overwatch and Ubisoft's Rainbow Six Siege.

Gone is regenerating health. Everyone now has a health bar and you have to manually heal yourself when you take damage. While this might sound like a chore, we found the experience of diving for cover as bullets shattered everything around us to jam a needle into our character's arm to be intense. This also means you can't dash from cover to cover, wait a few seconds for your health to regenerate, and then leap into the fray once more. While this tweak may seem like a small one, it fundamentally changes how people need to play Call of Duty to succeed.

A smaller change from Black Ops 3 but one worth mentioning is that specialists play much more like classes now. Whereas in Black Ops 3 we often felt like like we were just another player running around with a special ability that we could activate to rack up kills, Black Ops 4 focuses on team play. During our match, we played a character who could use his special ability to summon a grenade launcher capable of decimating enemies with grenades that bounced around corners. Another character could use a device that dealt damage to enemies in range, making the class particularly useful for staying on control points.

These changes are smart because they force players to work together in a subtle way, much like Titanfall 2 and Overwatch, arming them with characters whose abilities complement one another. To say that Call of Duty is going all-in on team play is an exaggeration given the popularity of free-for-all deathmatch, but it's clear that is where the big changes to the series are going to matter most in both hobby and esports play.

This is obviously just one third of what Black Ops 4 is bringing to players this October. The jury is still out on both Zombies and, more importantly, the game's touted battle royale mode, Blackout. What does a Call of Duty version of battle royale even look like? We'll have to wait to find out. But for the time being, what we've played of Black Ops 4 shows that despite all the criticism, Call of Duty is willing and able to make changes to thrive more than 14 years since the serie's debut.

» *Javy Gwaltney*

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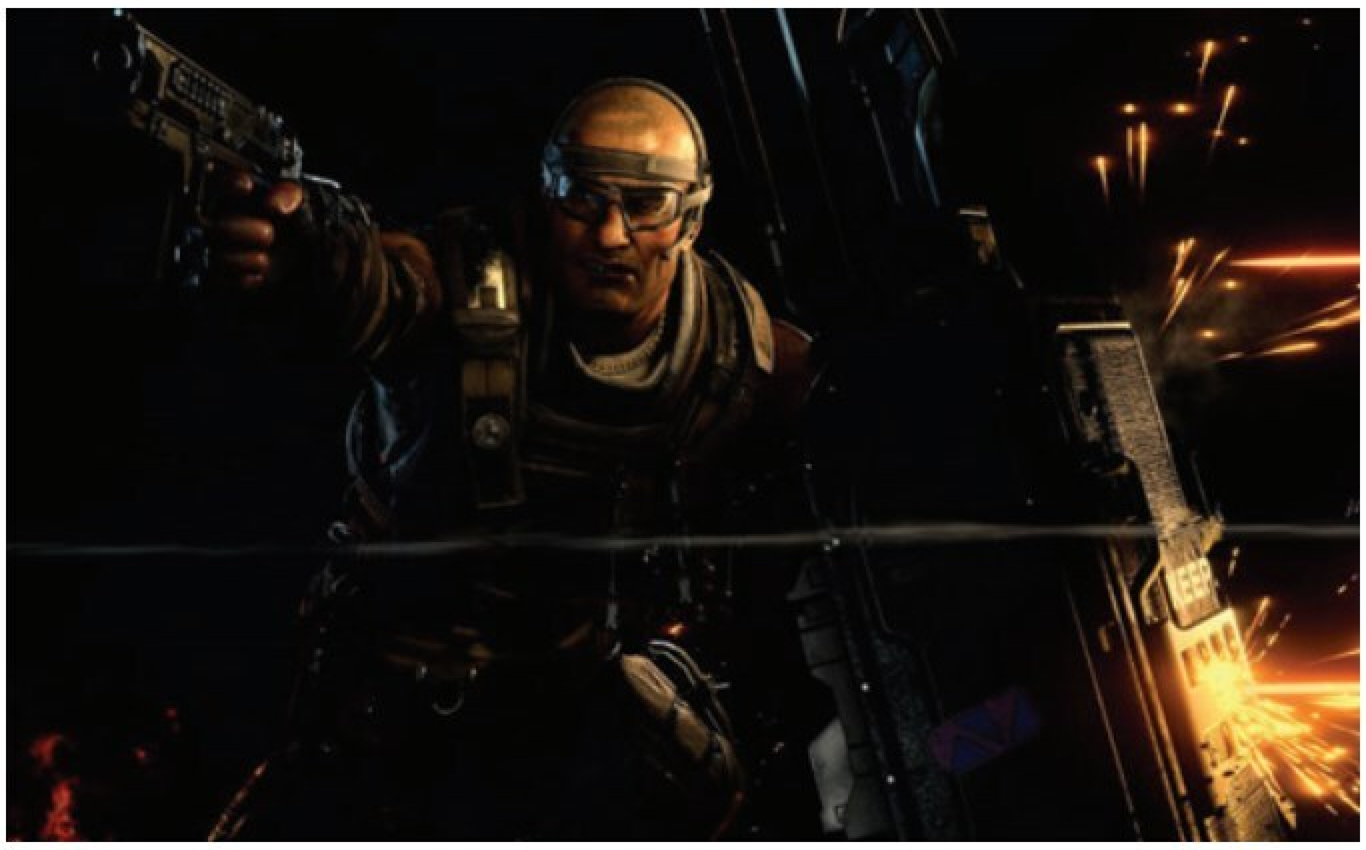

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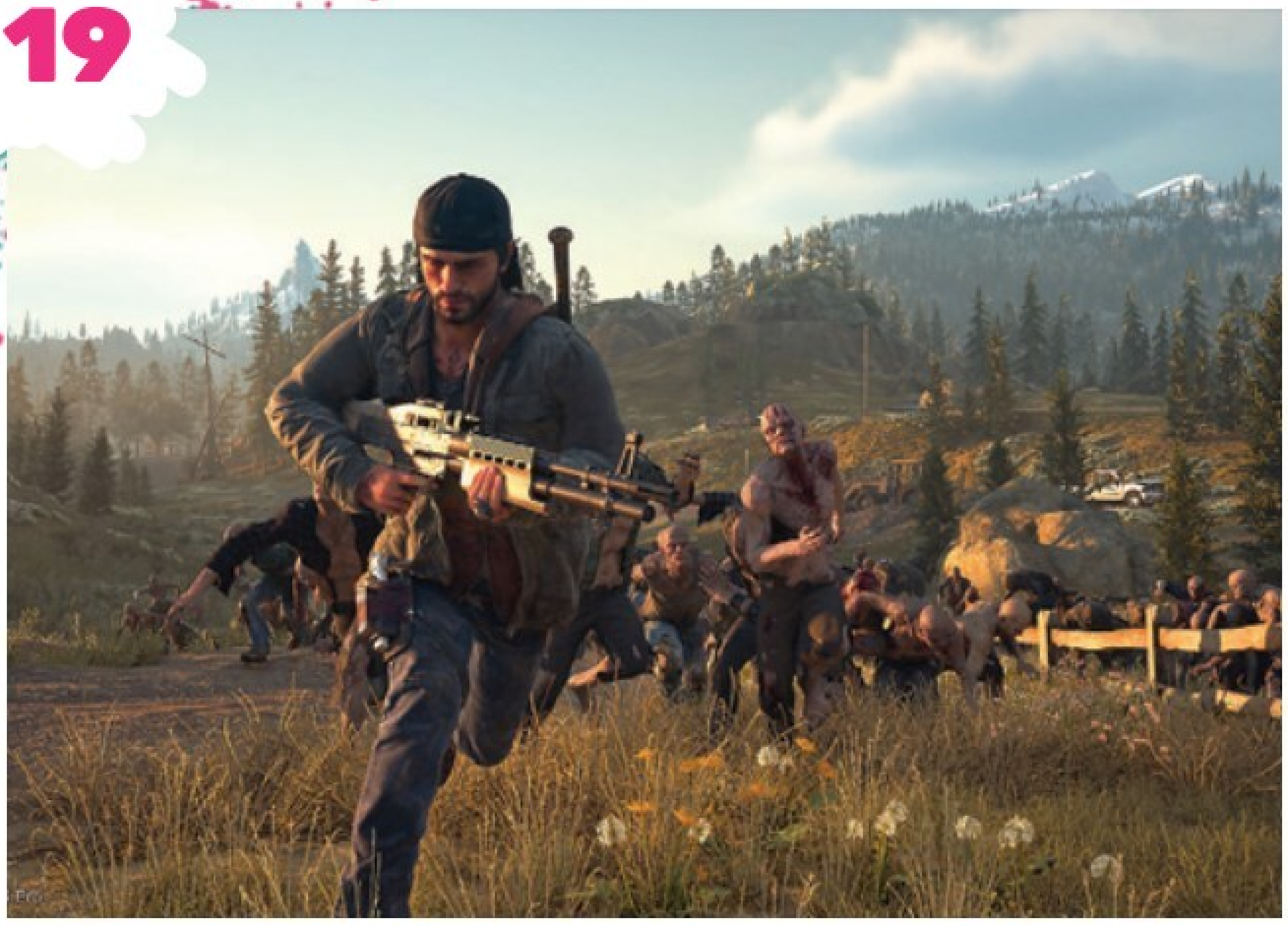

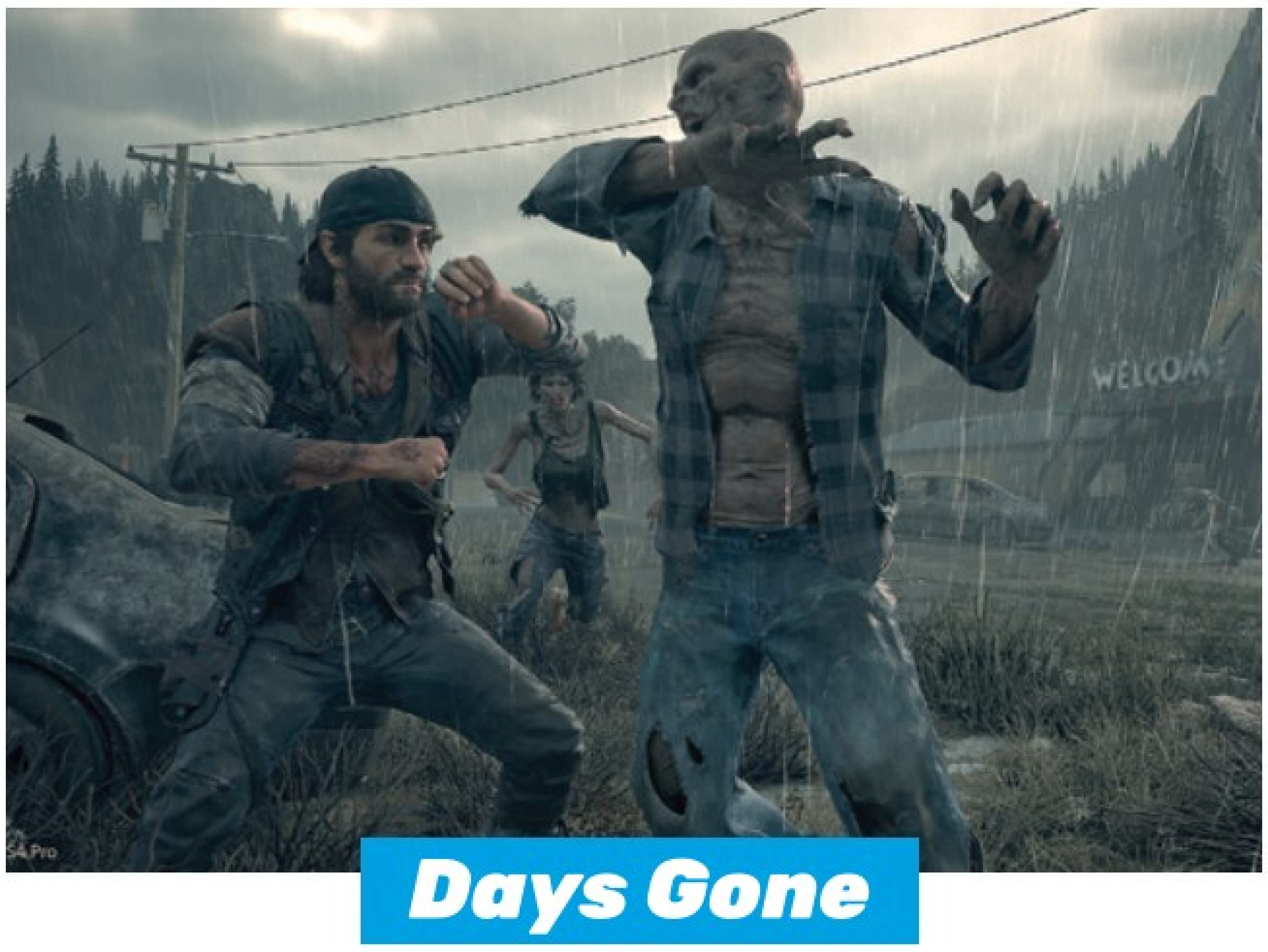

Days Gone

The E3 hordes have nothing on this deadly crowd

Platform: *PS4* **Style:** *1-Player Action*
Publisher: *Sony Interactive Entertainment*
Developer: *Sony Bend Studio* **Release:** *February 22*

We spent a few hours with Days Gone during our June cover story, and it was good to see a familiar face on the show floor. Deacon St. John seems to be holding up quite nicely, even though the world has fallen apart around him. While the E3 demo didn't contain anything that we didn't already get our hands on earlier, it was a nice reminder about why we are so excited about the game.

The infected hordes remains a highlight, with players having to contend with hundreds of swarming infected. Unlike the zombies and undead foes you find in a lot of post-apocalyptic games, these enemies aren't content with slowly shuffling toward your direction. Instead, the infected in Days Gone run toward you at a full sprint, nimbly climbing over vehicles and other obstacles that get in the way between them and their next meal (i.e., you).

Even though we had our strategies firmly in place by the time we got to the show, it was fun watching players try to figure out how to handle a crowd of that magnitude for the first time, amid the ruins of a former mass grave. Most first attempts understandably ended in failure, with a crowd of rotting monsters feasting on Deacon's lifeless form. Over time, most players understood the value in not remaining rooted in place too long, taking brief but effective potshots at explosive barrels and methodically thinning out the horde over time rather than attempting any foolhardy heroics.

Some players ultimately succeeded, while others never lived through the demo. It looks like the freakers are going to be well fed come February. **» *Jeff Cork***

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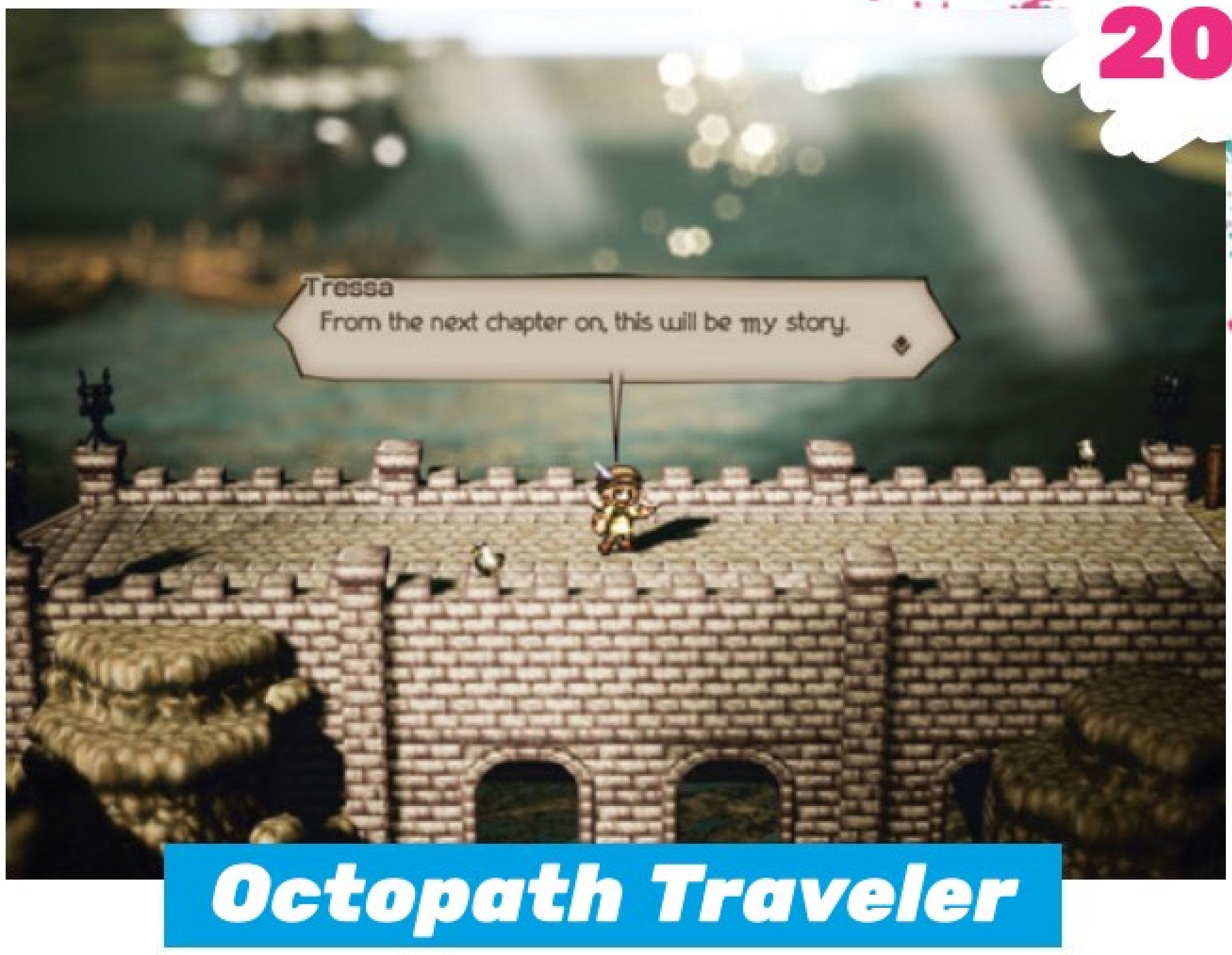


Octopath Traveler

One final demo before launch

Platform: *Switch* **Style:** *1-Player Role-Playing*
Publisher: *Nintendo* **Developer:** *Square Enix, Acquire*
Release: *July 13*

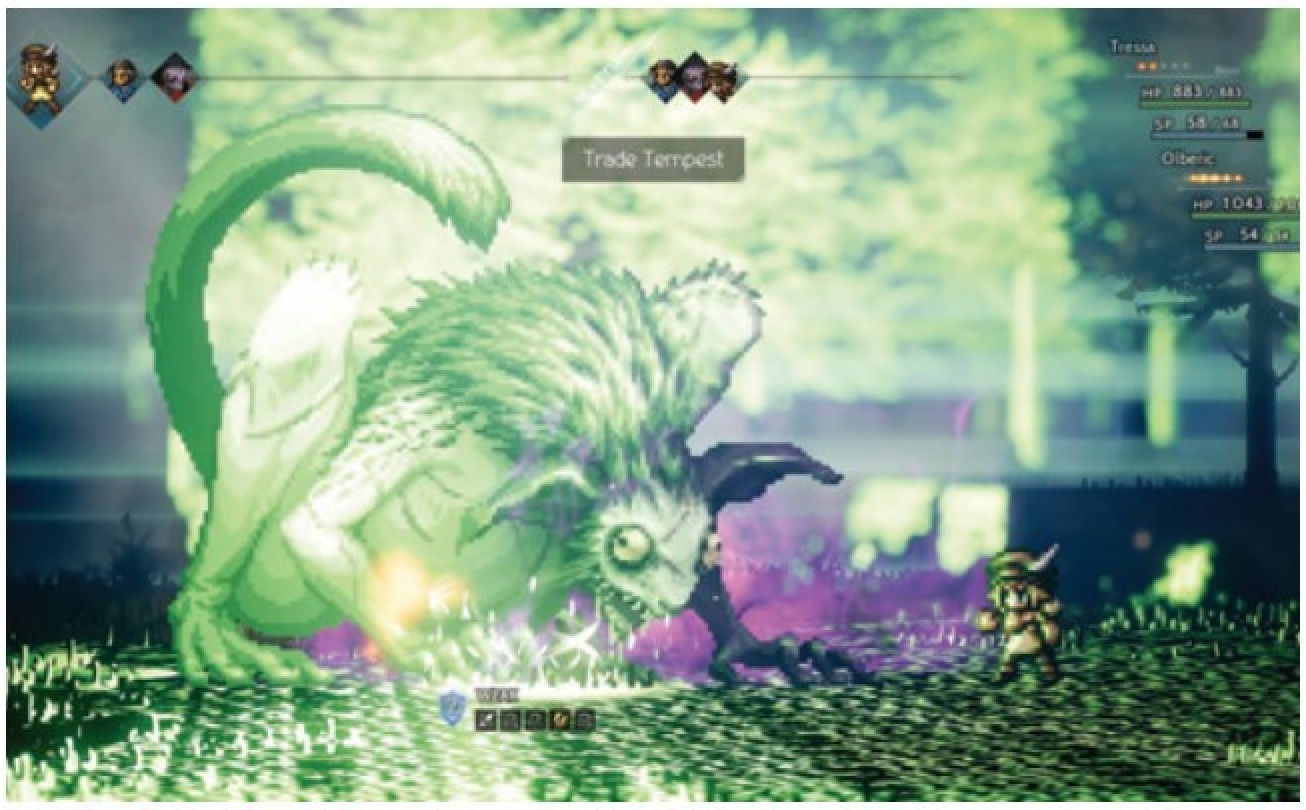
Octopath Traveler is a traditional turn-based JRPG that combines beautiful HD graphics with pixel art reminiscent of the Super NES days. Featuring eight playable characters on personal quests from different points in the world, Square Enix hopes to deliver a unique experience that harkens back to the 16-bit era of JRPGs.

While not technically on the E3 show floor, Square Enix's upcoming role-playing game for Switch made a splash with the release of a second free demo. Unlike the 2017 demo, this one allows you to choose from all eight characters and play through their first chapter, as well as some side quests.

Once you complete that first chapter, you can travel around and meet up with other characters and complete the first chapters of their stories. The demo features various quality-of-life improvements over the previous one, including a new sprint button and the ability to skip cutscenes. This is also the first time players get their hands on the fleshed-out party system to see how the characters play off of each other and deliver extra layers of strategy to the combat.

All progress from the demo carries over into the main game, which means you can get a jump on the campaigns. This could come in handy, as the team revealed on the Nintendo Treehouse E3 stream that Octopath Traveler contains anywhere from 80 to 100 hours of content.

In addition to the release of the demo, producer Masashi Takahashi told Japanese gaming website *Dengeki Online* that Octopath Traveler will not have downloadable content as the game is a "finished product." If you're excited for Octopath Traveler, you thankfully don't have to wait long; it launches this month. **» *Brian Shea***



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Dying Light 2

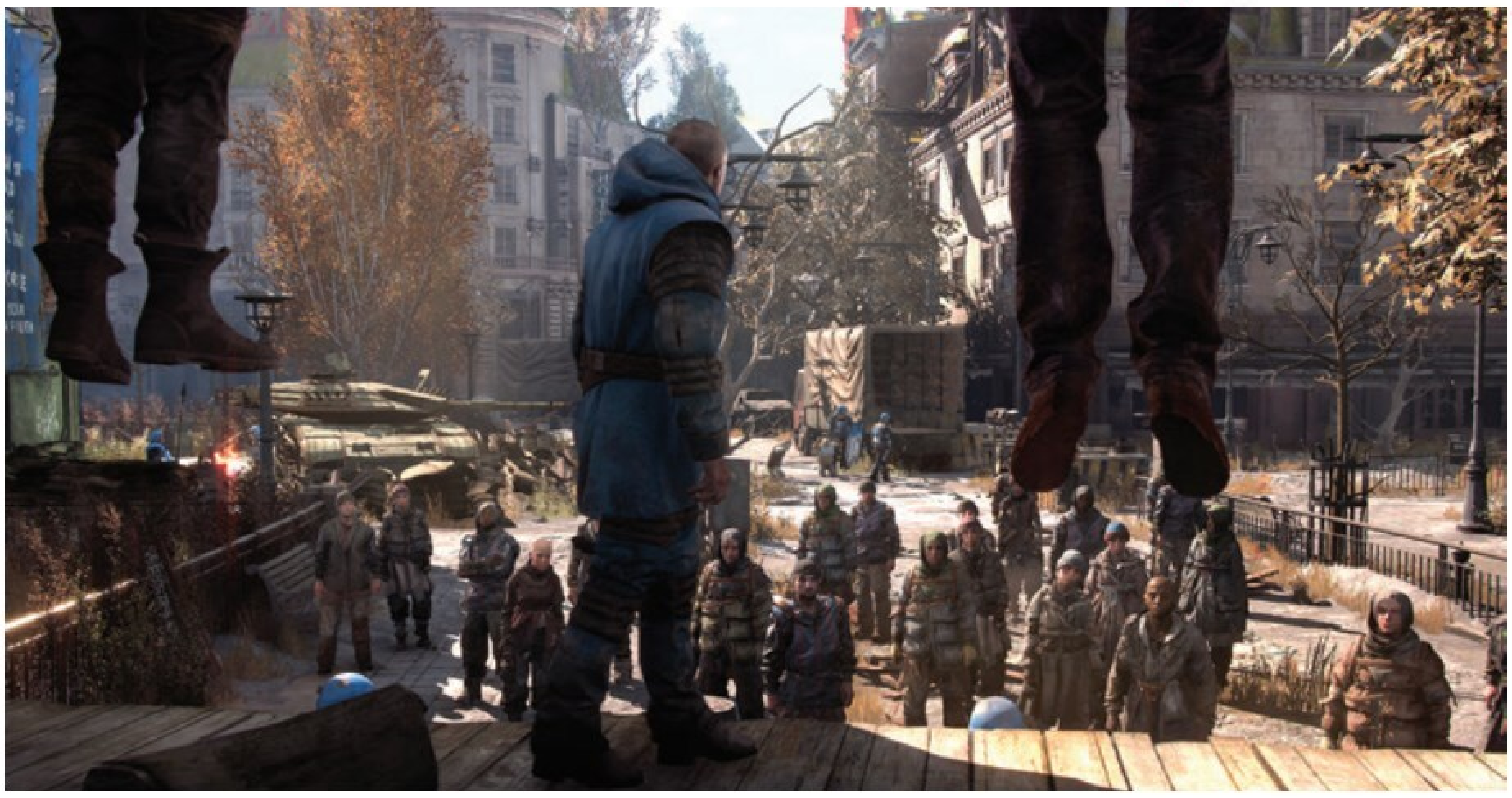
Techland gears up for its biggest zombie apocalypse yet

Platform: *PS4, Xbox One, PC* **Style:** *1-Player Action (4-Player Online)* **Publisher:** *Techland* **Developer:** *Techland* **Release:** *2019*

Techland is no stranger to open-world sandboxes teeming with the undead. After creating the original Dead Island and its follow-up Dead Island: Riptide for Deep Silver, the Poland-based developer left its flagship series behind to start from scratch. The result of the team's risky gamble was Dying Light, which offered the same meaty RPG progression and technical combat of its predecessors, but with a much-welcomed injection of speed and fluidity thanks to a new parkour system. For the sequel, Techland is literally doubling down on Dying Light's strengths, offering players twice the number of parkour abilities to help explore (and hopefully survive in) a city that dwarfs any open-world environment the developer has created before.

To call Dying Light 2 a big game isn't just hyperbole; Techland says the new open world is four times the combined size of all of Dying Light's previous maps – the two maps included in the original game, plus the super-sized expansion map included in Dying Light: The Following. But it isn't the size alone that makes Harran – the last city standing after the Dying Light's cataclysmic infection – an interesting new setting. This time around, your choices affect the delicate balance of the world's competing factions, which will in turn shape the city itself.

Techland showed us a convincing example of this dynamic during our hands-off E3 demo. The player could choose between relinquishing control of a water tower to either a security force called the Peacekeepers, or a pair of two-bit bandits. Siding with the Peacekeepers transforms the city (over the course of a few in-game weeks) into a cleaner and safer environment, as organized squads frequently patrol the streets. The water also becomes freely available to citizens throughout the city via fountains that you can replenish your health at. However, it's not all sunshine and rainbows. The Peacekeepers aren't big believers in democracy, and hold public executions of anyone who dares to question their authority.



Siding with the bandits leads to a completely different vision of the city. The people are free to do as they please, but without the Peacekeepers' security forces, the streets are dirtier and more dangerous. The water supply also remains under the lock and key of your less-than-reputable business partners, who charge a high price for a drink – though they also provide you with a cut of the profits. An entire black market even pops up in this scenario, full of new NPCs to meet and do business with. Techland is taking these player-driven transformations seriously, and has hired the famed Chris Avellone as the narrative designer, in addition to hiring some members of The Witcher 3's writing staff to help craft a more compelling storyline this time around.

Even if you don't plan on playing Dying Light 2 for the story, the massive open-world, expanded parkour and combat abilities, and the return of four-player co-op should be enough to stave off even the worst case of zombie fatigue for one more romp through the post-apocalypse. **» *Jeff Marchiafava***

Just Cause 4

Avalanche homes in on dumb fun for another explosive sequel

Platform: *PS4, Xbox One, PC* **Style:** *1-Player Action* **Publisher:** *Square Enix* **Developer:** *Avalanche Studios* **Release:** *December 4*

Rico Rodriguez has been overthrowing ruthless dictators since the original Xbox/PS2 days, putting him in the company of other timeless video game heroes like Nathan Drake, Master Chief, and Sam Fisher. If you think that means Rico is due for a gritty reboot, however, think again – Avalanche knows exactly what fans enjoy about the Just Cause series, and isn't afraid to get gloriously stupid with yet another over-the-top sequel.

Take Rico's iconic grappler for instance. The nifty gadget has received a steady stream of upgrades over the years, allowing Rico to slingshot his away around the environment, tether objects together, and spam enemies and civilians alike with sticky bombs and rockets. Just Cause 4 introduces yet another new avenue for chaos: Rico can now attach massive balloons called "air lifters" to any surface, inflating, deflating, and popping them as he sees fits. Players can also fully customize all the variables of the grappler's different functions, allowing them to set up elaborate, physics-based scenarios. In our hands-off demo, Rico used the grappler's new air lifter projectiles to raise a cargo container off the ground, then attached a series of rockets on the back and surfed it through the air like an improvised (and highly volatile) blimp while taking potshots at enemies. Of course, you can also just strap a balloon to an unsuspecting guard's hindquarters, inflate them into the stratosphere, and then watch them plummet back down to earth. Whatever floats your boat.

While Just Cause 4's gameplay might be stupid, the systems behind it are incredibly smart. Avalanche is once again upgrading its best-in-class physics-based rendering for more believable destruction, and is even implementing full wind current and weather simulations. The former allows Rico to glide around the gargantuan fictional country of Solis with ease, while the latter offers up extreme weather conditions like sandstorms, blizzards, and tornadoes that will destroy anything that's not nailed down. During our demo, Rico chased a towering tornado through a military outpost, which demolished entire buildings and flung enemy vehicles through the air like they were Matchbox cars. This encounter was a scripted mission, but Avalanche says tornadoes will also naturally occur in the game world, along with other weather systems.

Just Cause 4 also simulates a continuous warzone between Solis' freedom fighters and a paramilitary group called the Black Hand; the frontline will change dynamically as Rico liberates the country, so you can nosedive into the action at any time and lend a helping hand if you somehow ever find yourself bored. Chaos objects (i.e. big explosive-looking objects adorned in bright-red paint) also have added functionalities, such as shooting the hatch off the back of a cylindrical tank to make it rocket across the battlefield like a makeshift torpedo.

For a series that's all about revolution, it may seem like Just Cause 4 is playing it safe. But even though Avalanche is adhering to the same tried-and-true formula, Just Cause 4 is still wildly ambitious. Solis is the most massive, detailed, and complex game world Avalanche has ever created – we can't wait to blow it up this December. **» *Jeff Marchiafava***

The Division 2

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Time to drain the swamp

Platform: *PS4, Xbox One, PC* **Style:** *Online Multiplayer Shooter* **Publisher:** *Ubisoft* **Developer:** *Massive Entertainment, Red Storm* **Release:** *March 15*

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As Bungie learned the hard way with Destiny 2, migrating a fervent fan base from one shared space to another can be tricky; if your new endgame doesn't have some semblance of the depth the previous game offered, the backlash can be harsh. Massive Entertainment doesn't want to make the same mistake with The Division 2, which is why it came out of the gates talking about how its content can keep players engaged well beyond level cap.

The Division 2 moves the action from decimated Manhattan to Washington, D.C., which has also seen better days. Six months have passed since the outbreak spread across the world, and Division agents are headed to the nation's capital after losing contact with headquarters. Playing as a brand new agent (sorry, no carryover!), you need to investigate what happened, neutralize the rival factions vying for control of the city, and aid in the rebuilding efforts.

Ubisoft says D.C. is 20 percent bigger than midtown Manhattan, and features much greater geographic diversity. Your adventures take you from the heavily looted commercial center to wooded areas where nature is reclaiming the land, a flooded government center, the Georgetown suburbs, and the tourist-centric areas around the mall. I also noticed a towering wall covered in barbed wire – D.C. has a dark zone of its own – and you once again need to bring a base of operations online.

During a hands-on session, the biggest change that stuck out was the time to kill. Some shooter fans could never warm up to the spongy nature of The Division's enemies; it felt weird to spend an entire magazine's worth of bullets just to down an unarmed union worker. Though they still take more bullets to kill than they would in a Rainbow Six or Ghost Recon game, unarmored enemies are much less resistant to gunfire this time around. Heavily armored enemies still take a hail of bullets to neutralize, but their modular armor can be gradually destroyed to open up weak spots to target.

You'll need more than just good aim to survive the endgame, which is why Ubisoft is introducing a new progression system for players who hit the level cap. Once you reach this threshold, you gain access to a suite of specializations that each come with a new signature weapon. The three options on display for the E3 demo were the Survivalist (crossbow), Demolitionist (grenade launcher), and Sharpshooter (.50 cal sniper rifle). These signature weapons all have special ammo you can pick up during firefights for added punch, and each specialization has a unique progression path that allows you to create more variety with the build that you have via mod and talent unlocks. You aren't locked into an option once you choose it; you can hot swap these in and out and continue down their respective progression paths when they are equipped. These should come in handy during the new eight-player raids, which are one of the "accessible, deep, and varied" endgame options Massive plans to offer during the full year of free expansion content following release.

One of the things Ubisoft wants to push in The Division 2 is more player expression, which it is calls "peacocking." Red Storm senior producer Tony Sturtzel said they have reserved vanity slots for things that you can only get by achieving certain accomplishments in the game. Think of them like trophies you can display on your character. Ubisoft is also expanding the available wardrobe – sounds like we'll have more options that expand beyond the Eddie Bauer catalog this time.

None of the planned changes for The Division 2 sound revolutionary, but all sound like smart enhancements. After recalibrating its approach post-launch, Massive has the original game in a great place right now. If it can build off that success with these subtle tweaks, The Division 2 could be poised for a great launch.
» Matt Bertz

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Forza Horizon 4

Expanding its horizons

Platform: Xbox One, PC **Style:** 1-Player Racing (12-Player Online) **Publisher:** Microsoft Studios **Developer:** Playground Games **Release:** October 2

Forza Horizon has always been about an open world, but with this fourth installment it looks like it's actually becoming one. Not only do players explore a gorgeous version of Britain, from Scotland to Cornwall, complete with dynamic weather and season changes. Your friends – not just their drivatars – can be with you for every event, off-road impulse, and speed camera along the way.

The casual racing franchise has had co-op racing, but FH 4 integrates its previous disparate streams into a unified experience. Up to a dozen other players populate your world in real-time, and they will be replaced by another dozen and so on and so forth as you go to different areas. Their cars won't have any collision to them (unless you're already friends or you start a race), and you can block people you don't want in your world, but they are there to jump into events with or just cruise along with. If you want to avoid other people altogether, the feature can be turned off at any time, and traditional drivatars will take their place.

Regardless of whom you choose to play the game with, Horizon 4 wants to make your actions always critical to how you progress. While racing events is the way most people will proceed through the game, if you're more about creating paint jobs or streaming through Mixer, you also have a viable path forward.

Forza Horizon 4 features jobs like being a stunt or taxi driver, so we imagine these fold into that custom progression concept. The game also expands the Horizon lifestyle concept with the ability to own businesses and houses, which sound like great ways to expand players' stake in the world apart from being number one on a leaderboard. There are approximately 12 houses – from a cottage to Edinburgh Castle – and they enable fast traveling and let you view your cars in the gorgeous Forzavista showroom trappings.

These kinds of touches are not necessarily what you spend the majority of the game focused on, but they're the kind of world-building features that past titles like Test Drive Unlimited have tried to implement but lacked the online infrastructure to actually pull off.

That's not a problem for Microsoft, and given the larger post-release plans the game has, we expect variety to mean more than just the leaves changing colors. Each in-game season passes for all players once a week, making an in-game year equivalent to four weeks. During this time developer Playground Games says it wants to provide content specific for each season. Forzathon shared group goals, events, and new cars, should go along nicely with the normal barn finds, bucket list challenges, and the fact that each season makes driving feel a little different (some areas are also only accessible in winter).

With their beautiful high-performance cars and modeled tracks, sim-based series like Forza Motorsport propose that they are the soul of racing. But Forza Horizon – with everything from smashing roadside signs for shop discounts to taking pictures of beautiful scenery – has consistently captured our attention with its ability to offer racing as well as a world full of challenges and distractions. Forza Horizon 4 expands this world, making it even more attractive to racers of all stripes. **» Matthew Kato**

Some areas of the map will only be accessible in winter via frozen lakes

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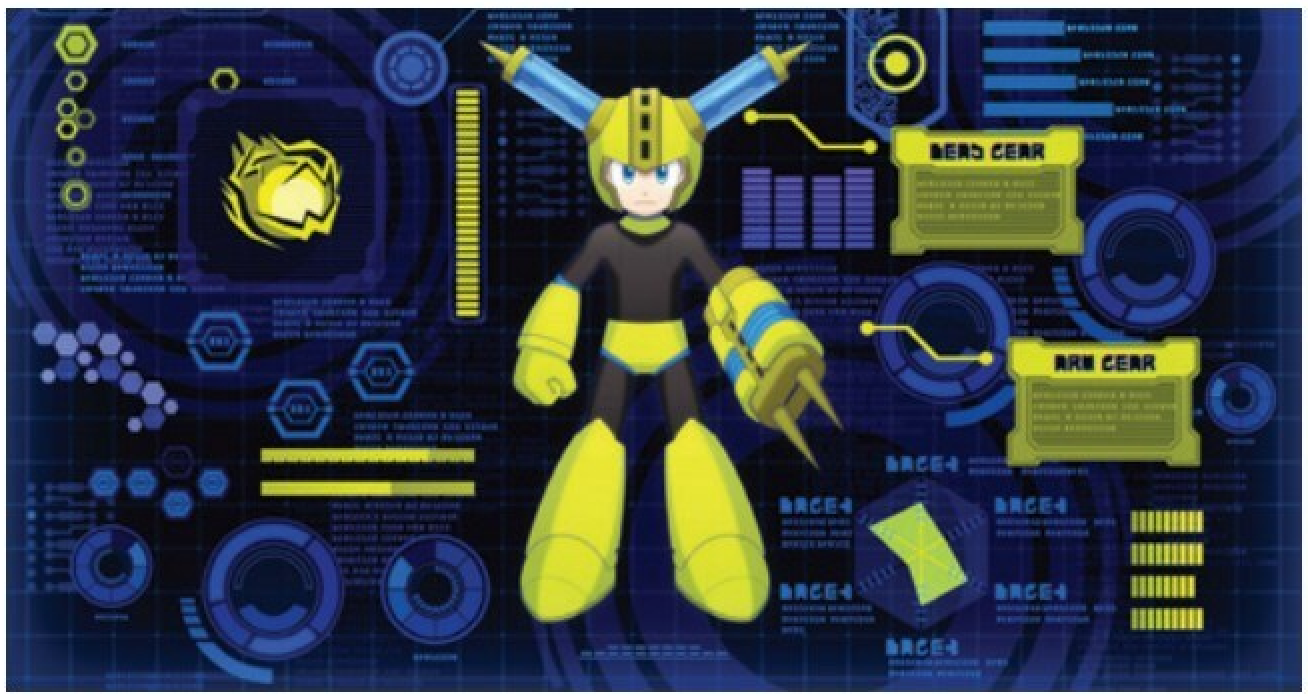
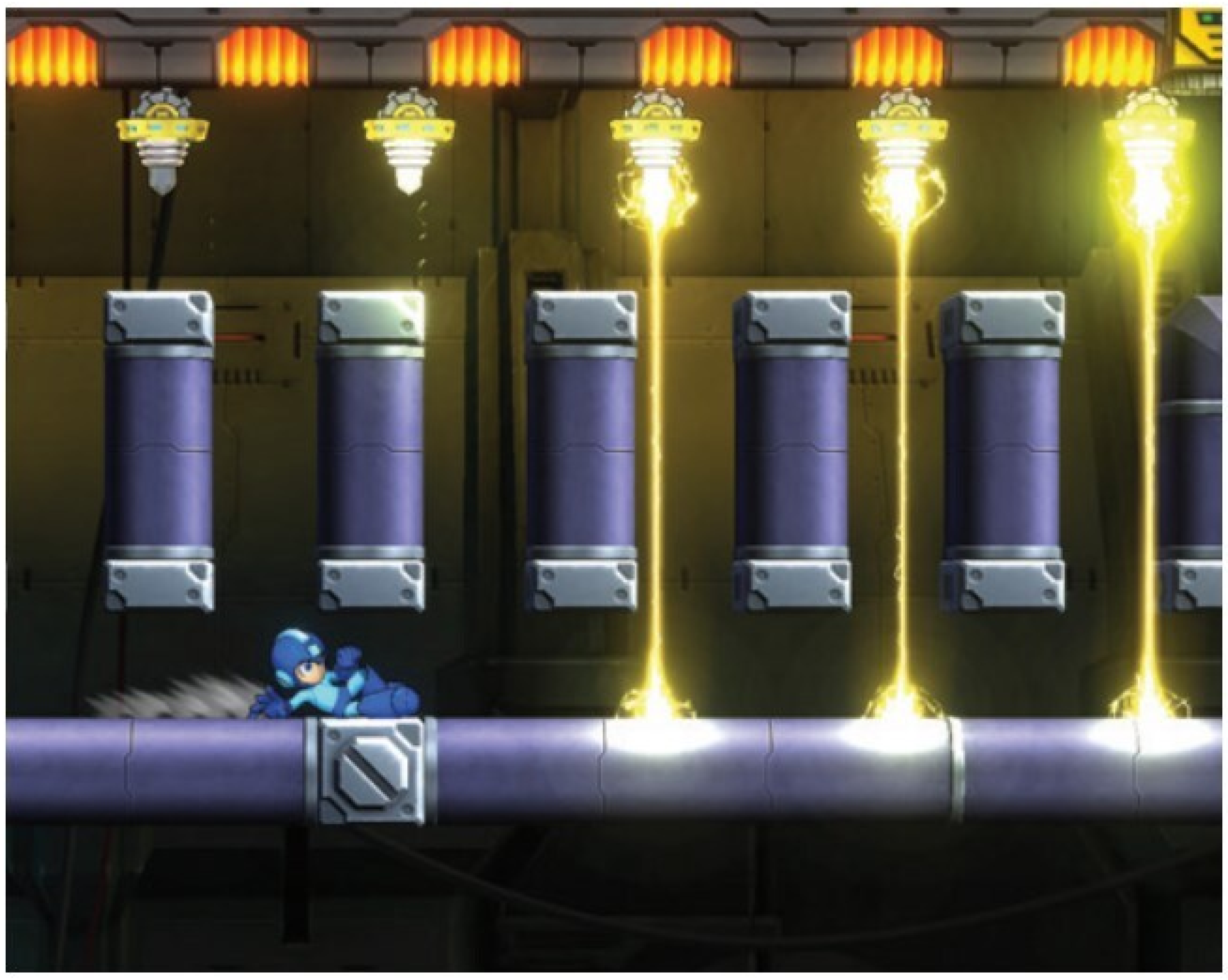
Mega Man 11

Finally, some slowdown we can get behind

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC **Style:** 1-Player Action
Publisher: Capcom **Developer:** Capcom
Release: October 2



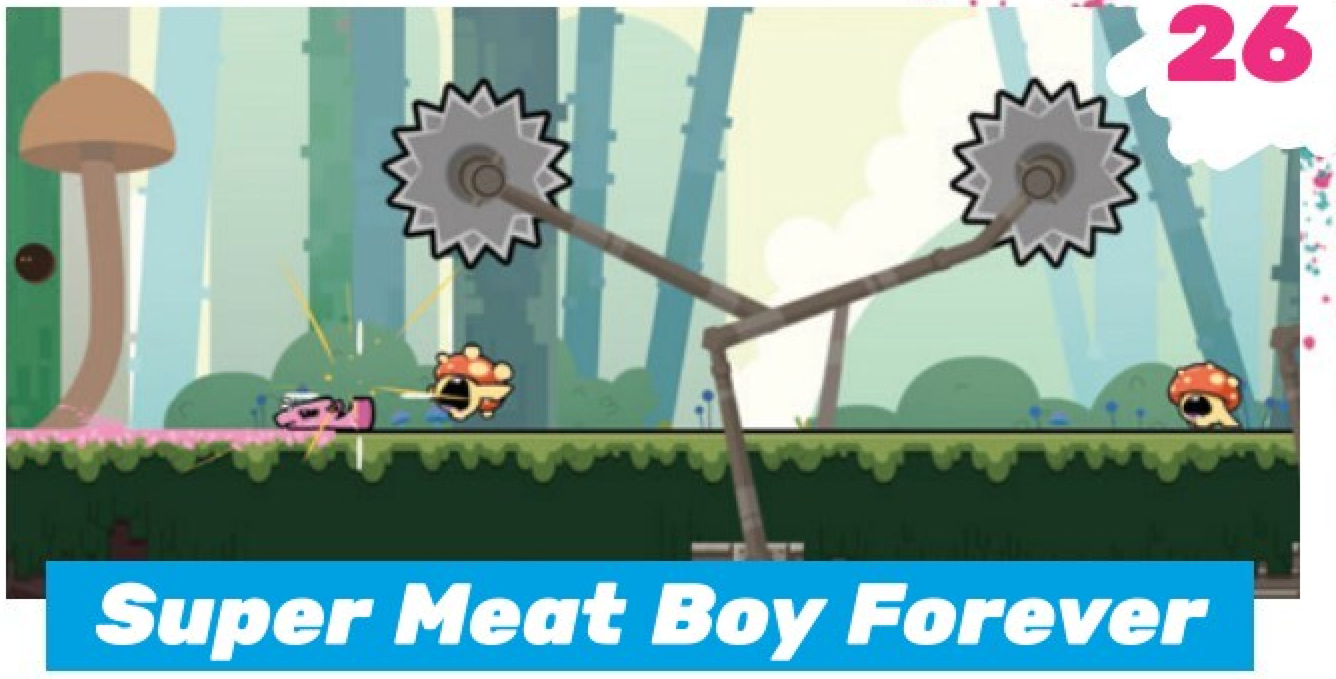


Mega Man might get his name on the games, but he'd be nothing without the Robot Masters. Capcom brought a couple of the baddies along for E3, and we got to see how we fared against Fuse Man, an electrically charged villain that puts the blue bomber's new abilities to the test.

Mega Man 11 isn't pixelated like his past few retro-style outings, but the character is as charming as ever. I was a little apprehensive about the art style when we featured it on our January cover, but seeing it in motion alleviated all my fears. The game is crisp and colorful, and it doesn't feel sterile and lifeless. More importantly, it plays just like the Mega Man titles of yesteryear. I was instantly able to jump, slide, and blast my way through Fuse Man's level.

As you work your way through his base, you start to encounter genre-standard obstacles like flashing beams of electricity. It's possible to time your jumps properly to avoid getting zapped, but I found myself leaning on the new Double Gear system. It essentially grants Mega Man the ability to slow down time or unleash a powerful blast from his Mega Buster. That first ability was a godsend during a mid-level boss battle, where the screen nearly filled with shockwaves of energy, though I used the second one as well – it came in particularly handy when I needed to wear down its armor plating.

Once Fuse Man himself was defeated, I checked out a tiny but welcome touch. When you beat a boss, you enter a demo room, which allows you to test out your new powers without worrying about running out of energy. Something tells me we'll be seeing a lot of that room in the future... **» *Jeff Cork***



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Super Meat Boy Forever

A meaty sequel

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC, iOS, Android
Style: 1-Player Platforming **Publisher:** Team Meat
Developer: Team Meat **Release:** 2018

Fans cried foul when Team Meat announced that its Super Meat Boy sequel would be a procedurally generated auto runner. But, after our time with Super Meat Boy Forever at E3, we can't think of a better sequel. While each level is procedurally generated, they feel incredibly polished, because each one is randomly constructed from over 100 handcrafted level segments. The controls remain incredibly tight and responsive, and Meat Boy has a super useful new move: an attack that allows him to slap away enemies. This move also extends his time in the air, which is crucial during some of the more challenging platforming sequences. After a few minutes, I didn't miss being able to control Meat Boy's run speed, but I did miss the game once the controller was ripped from my hands. **» *Ben Reeves***

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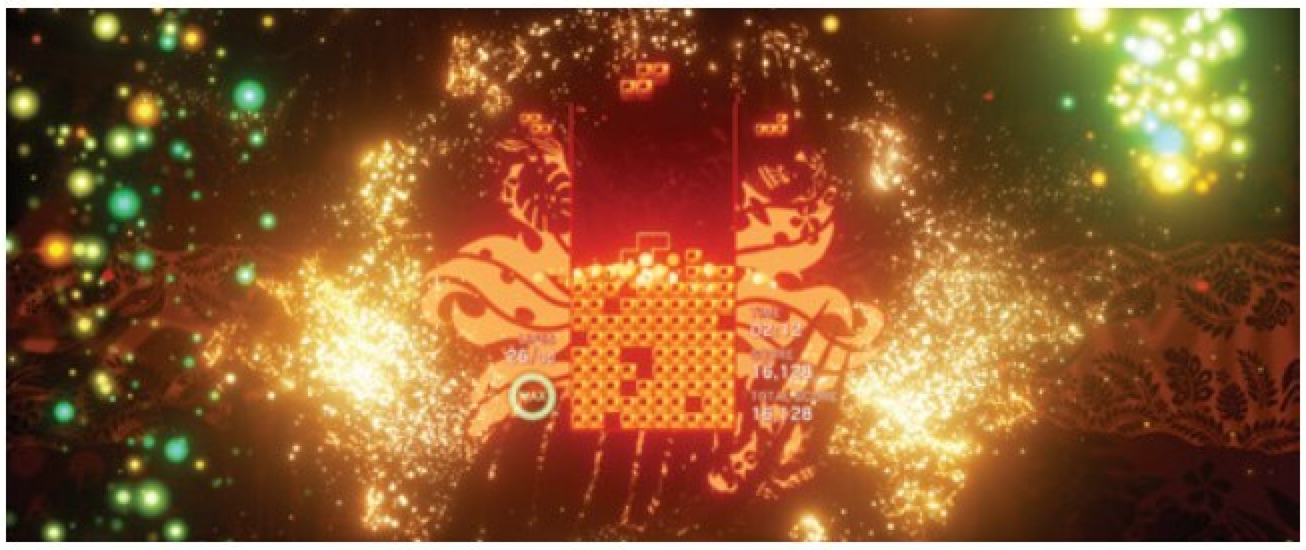
Tetris Effect

Possibly the most immersive Tetris experience yet

Platform: PSVR, PS4 **Style:** 1-Player Puzzle
Publisher: Enhance Games **Developer:** Monstars, Resonair
Release: Fall

Named after the way Tetris has a knack for shaping your real-world thoughts around block-arranging the more you play it, Tetris Effect (from Rez and Lumines creator Tetsuya Mizuguchi) aims to transform Tetris from a quick-fix hit into an audio-visual experience akin to Lumines.

Rather than pick a single song that changes when you're in danger of filling the board, Effect cycles through licensed songs at a steady clip, altering the look of the background and blocks themselves to match the mood of the music. The backgrounds are gorgeous, and the visual effects are enhanced in VR. It might be weird to strap on a VR headset for a simple puzzler, but the way Effect alters Tetris should be more than worth it when it launches this fall. **» *Suriel Vazquez***



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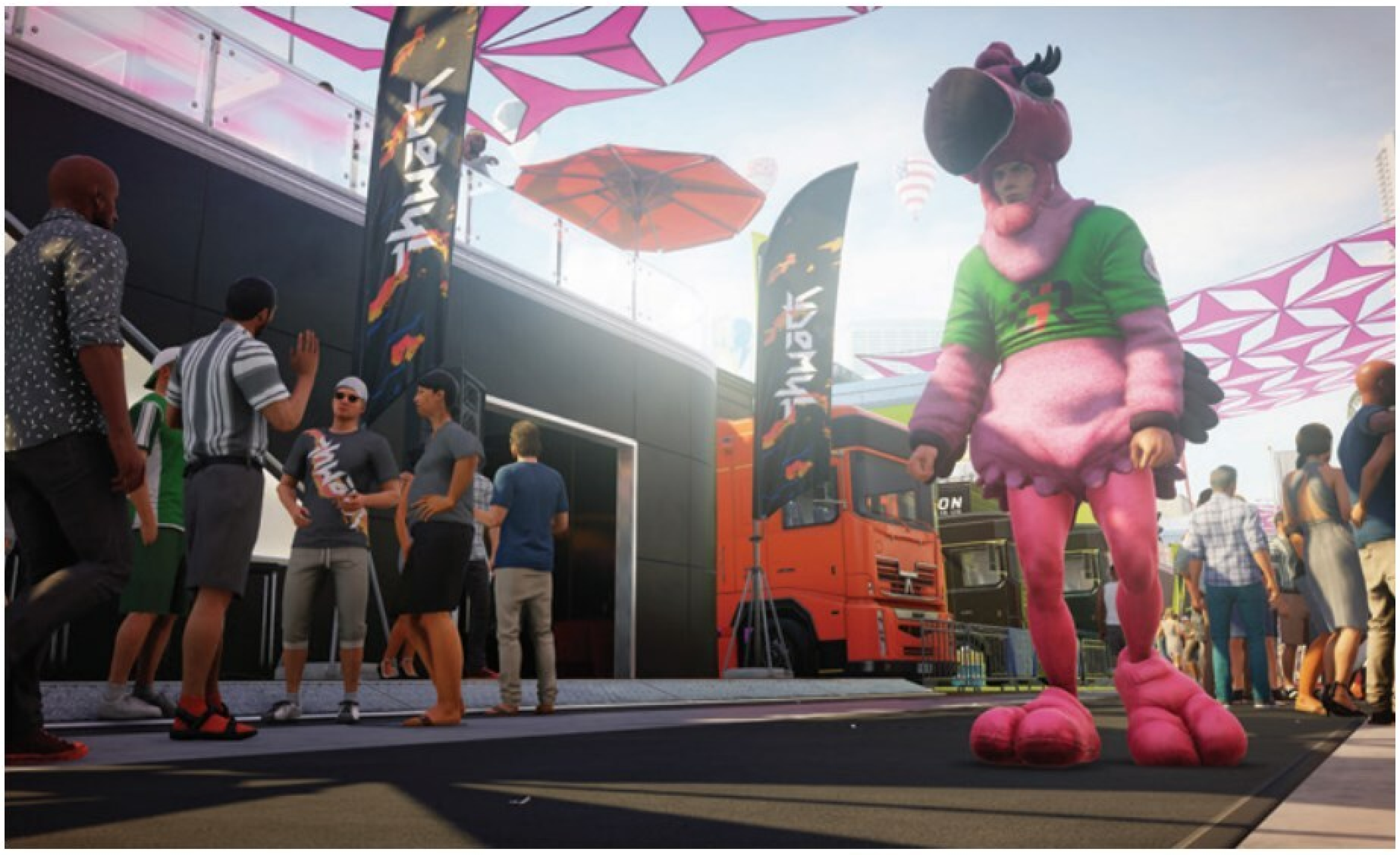
Hitman 2

Expanding the world of assassination

Platform: *PS4, Xbox One, PC* **Style:** *1-Player Action (2-Player Online)* **Publisher:** *Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment*
Developer: *IO Interactive* **Release:** *November 13*

IO Interactive has had some troubles when it comes to the Hitman franchise, buying their independence from publisher Square Enix and striking a deal with Warner Bros. to continue the stealth series. Now that the company's in a more stable place, it can focus on what it does best: Creating rich playgrounds for hunting down a single person and murdering them in broad daylight.

Unlike 2016's Hitman, which released its various locales over the course of a year, Hitman 2 will debut as a complete package. That gives thorough players less incentive to explore every nook and cranny of each individual map while they wait for the next to arrive, but those who like to voraciously devour their games all at once have reason to rejoice. That doesn't mean Hitman 2 is a one-and-done endeavor for IO, however. The company plans to support the game post-release with Elusive Targets and Escalation Contracts already confirmed to be added after the game ships this November.



In the meantime, what we saw of Hitman 2's new Miami location should give fans stung by the decision to move to a completely new product instead adding to the old one something to look forward to. The city is one of Hitman's biggest yet, clocking in with over 2,000 characters on the map. IO has become masters of creating environments that not only offer ample opportunities for fun and creative methods at every turn, but also feel like believable worlds. Miami is no exception, as most of the solutions I came across felt natural within the context of the world, even if I had to trigger certain events by being in the right place at the right time.

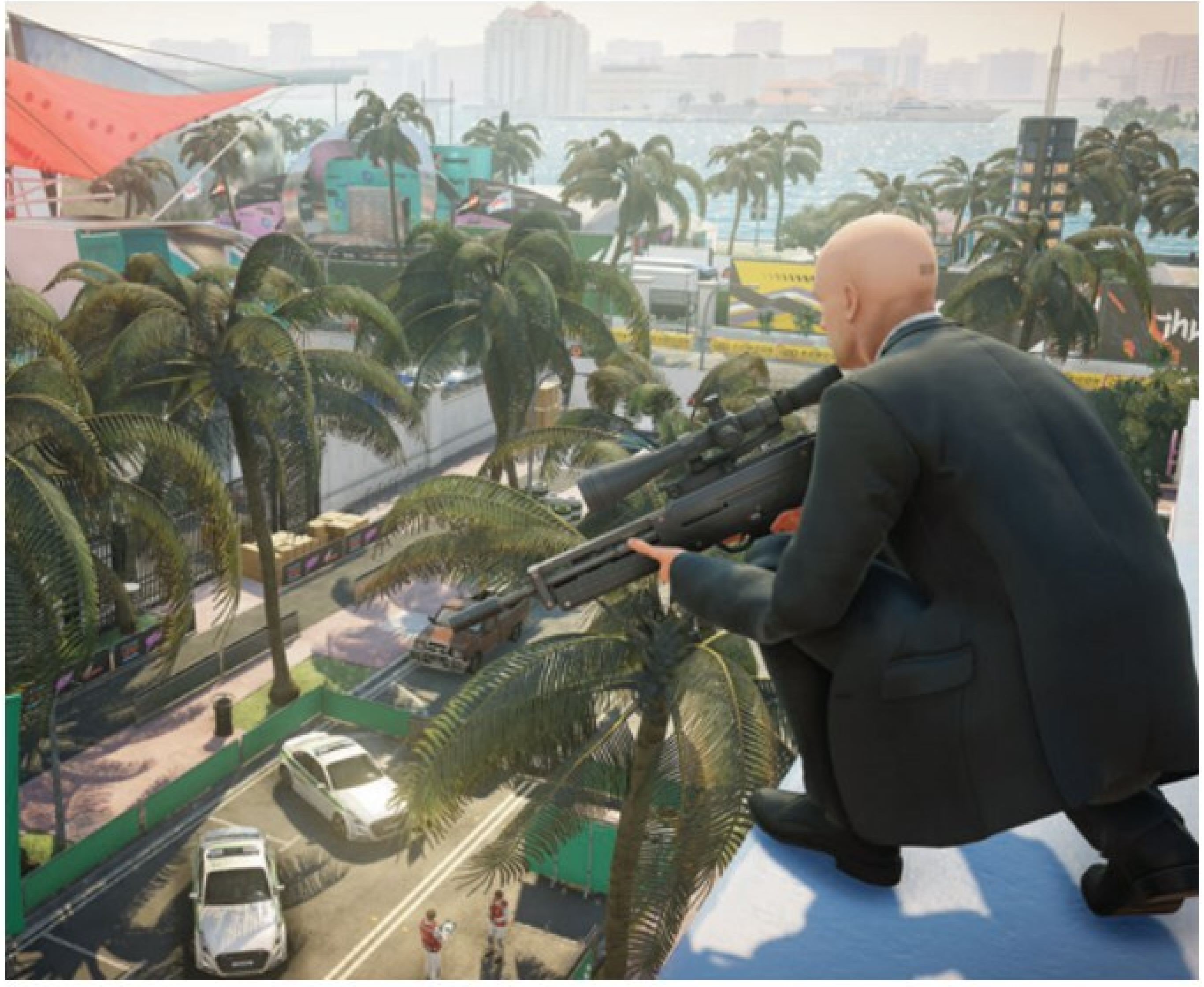
Breaking with the 2016 Hitman also allows for some technical upgrades, as well as some new tools for stealth. Blending in with crowds is now easier than ever, thanks to a more explicit system that shows you when you're hiding from suspicious passersby. You now also have the option of keeping your head down while wearing a uniform, pretending to work as you wait for your target to move toward their next objective. These additional options make sneaking your way through an area more intuitive, and should make for assassinations that feel smoother.

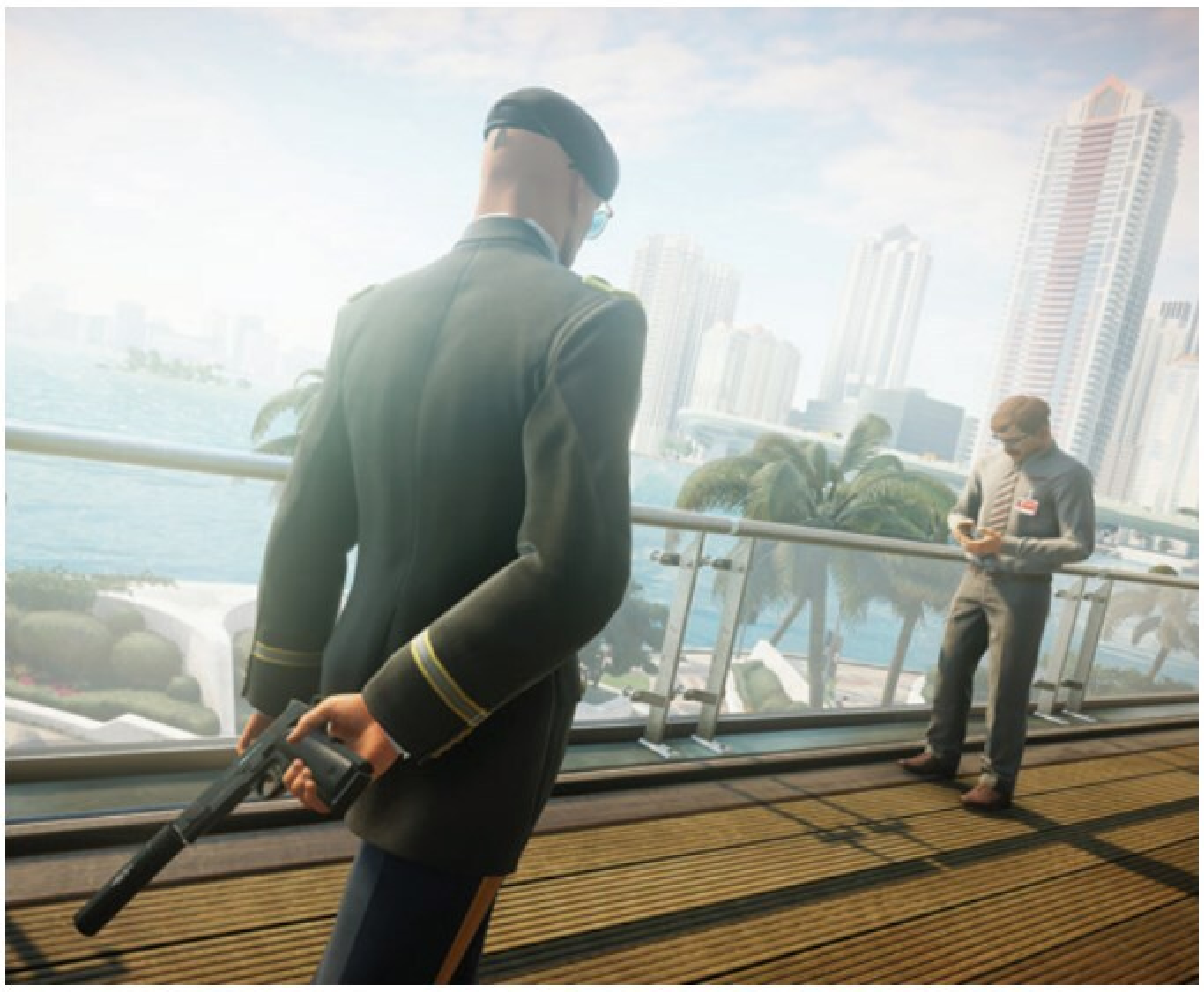
IO also confirmed Agenty 47's iconic briefcase makes a welcome return, letting you store any weapon or item and move it around the map. People will notice it, too, allowing for some clever set ups when security moves your unattended luggage past their metal detectors.

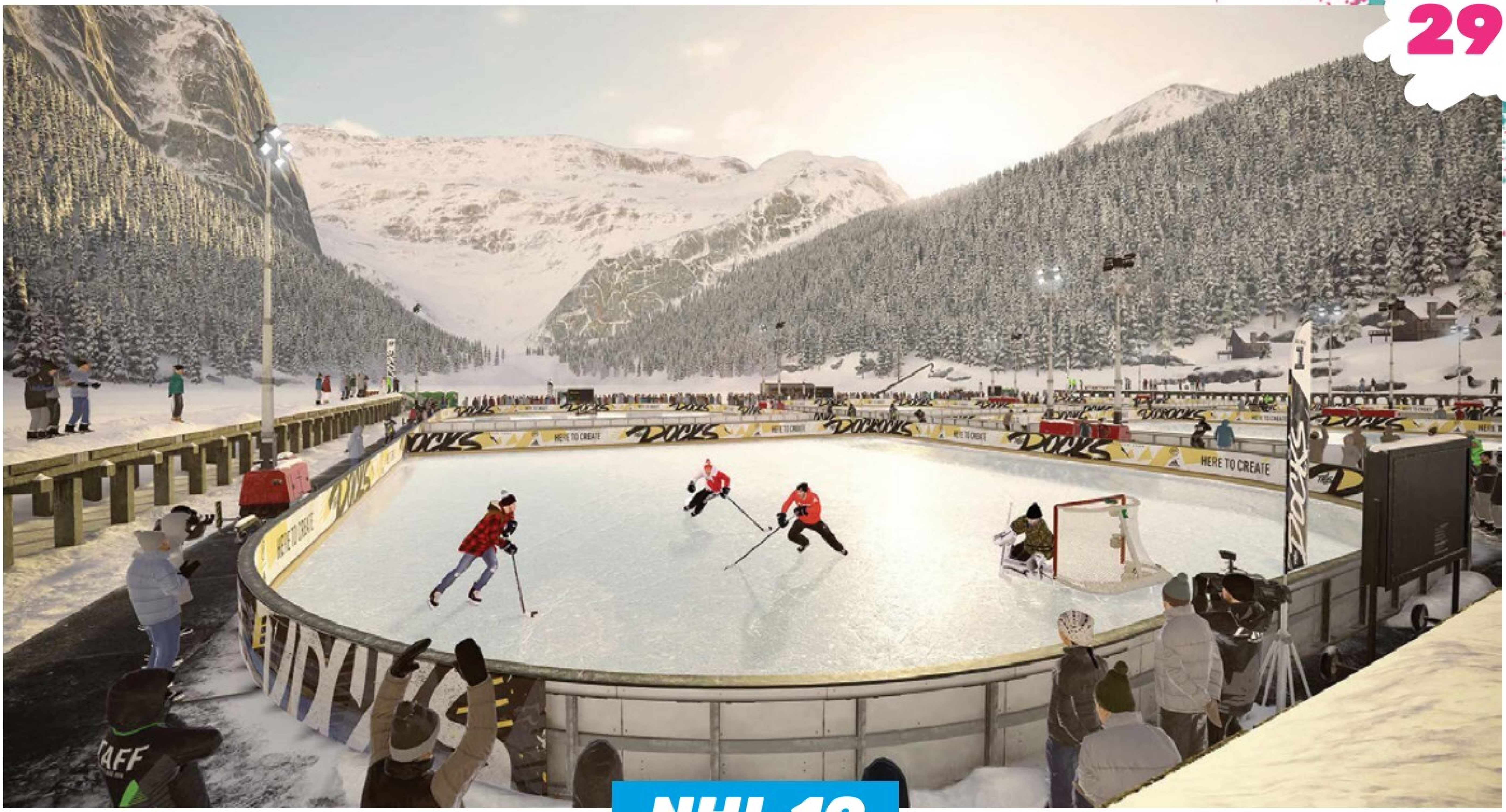
Not all the changes benefit Agent 47, however. Characters who may not otherwise notice you lugging a body around will now notice you if they happen to catch your reflection in a mirror, which means you'll have to look around bathrooms a bit more carefully now.

Hitman 2 isn't reinventing what fans love about the series' new direction, but it doesn't have to. Although veterans are no doubt irked about having to start over with a new game, our limited time with the demo makes it clear this sequel is tweaking just enough minor aspects to heighten the experience, making it a promising continuation of IO's ambitious stealth series.

» Suriel Vazquez







NHL 19

The most promising hockey game of the generation

Platform: PS4, Xbox One **Style:** 1 to 4-Player Sports (12-Player Online) **Publisher:** EA Sports **Developer:** EA Vancouver **Release:** September 14

After starting the console generation in the penalty box with a majorly disappointing debut, EA's NHL series has slowly skated back toward relevancy. But despite incremental improvements, the game has never felt truly "next gen." Based on our early impressions with NHL 19's new skating and physics systems, that time could finally be coming.

For years, we've been asking for dramatically improved player handling that gives us more fidelity in moving in small spaces, more agility when making turns so it doesn't feel like you are steering the *Titanic*, and better puck pickups. EA Canada thinks it can go three for three on these requests in NHL 19 thanks to the integration of the Real Player Motion animation technology.

Grabbing the controller, it only took a matter of seconds to understand just how dramatically the skating system has improved. Players burst out of their stops, showing the acceleration of world-class athletes. Their edgework looks more in line with NHL players, and it's much easier to turn, cut, make hard stops, and reposition yourself. "Before it was difficult to just take a step or two over, now you can actually do that," says creative director William Ho.

The new skating-animation system couples with a new physics engine to add a lot more variety to the types of hits you see across the ice. "The new physics engine gives us the ability to tune every single limb on the character, and because you see them in new positions they were never in before, we're seeing tons of new checks," says producer Sean Ramjagsingh. We saw several of these new hits in action, like a larger player driving through his target, open-ice hits that stop the puck carrier flat, and awkward collisions that take out a players' arms and legs on the same side.

The EASHL is the NHL franchise's stickiest mode, so when exploring new ways of capturing the essence of the sport EA wanted to expand the way players compete against one another. Enter The World of Chel.

This new social hub includes EASHL, Threes pick-up games, plus two new modes. The first is Pro-Am, which allows players who want to play online to hone their skills against A.I. before jumping into real competitions. The second is Ones, a new skill-based competition that pits your talents against others in a three-for-all where the player who scores the most goals against an A.I. goalie in a certain amount of time wins.

As you win these 1v1v1 competitions, you earn points that can eventually move you up the competitive tiers. Conversely, bad performance earn you a relegation. These matches are quick, so while this mode won't be a destination experience for me, I could see myself killing time here while waiting for my EASHL team to form up.

No matter which World of Chel mode you play, your player earns XP and rewards in the form of hockey bags. When first creating your player, you can choose from 12 player classes that break down according to classic hockey archetypes (sniper, playmaker, grinder, etc.). From there, you can pick from dozens of traits to activate in a primary and secondary slot, as well as specializations.

Every time you level up, you earn a hockey bag that includes a random cosmetic item. Yes, there is a lot of team-branded apparel, but you can also earn parkas, hoodies, hats, track pants, cargo pants, breezers, unique skates, and fun sticks like an NHL '94 themed twig. More than 900 customization items are in the game, with more to come post-release.

EA has big plans for NHL 19 beyond the World of Chel as well, including a new scouting system in franchise mode and the addition of more than 200 legendary players. All of these additions sound promising, but the true game changer should be the revamped skating. If EA nails it, this could be the must-own hockey game of the generation. » **Matt Bertz**

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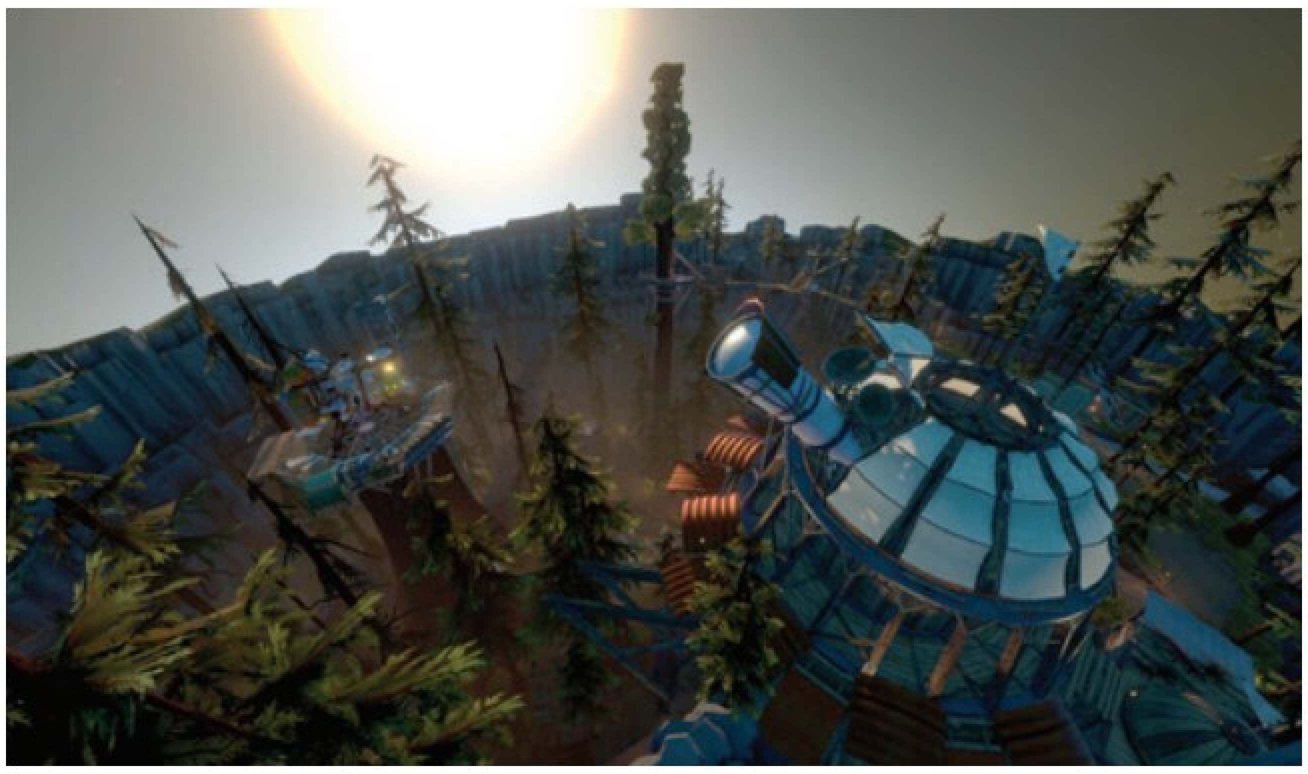
Outer Wilds

Venture forth into a mysterious abyss

Platform: Xbox One, PC **Style:** 1-Player Adventure
Publisher: Annapurna Interactive **Developer:** Mobius Digital
Release: 2018



The beginning of Outer Wilds is similar to the beginning of any game, with the player character tasked to perform menial item collection to facilitate an inciting incident. In this case, the nameless main character searches a rustic alien planet to get a rocket into space for the singular goal of discovery. Once the protagonist breaks through the atmosphere, the game begins in earnest, and defies expectations with every subsequent turn.

Outer Wilds is all about letting your curiosity wander unleashed from humble beginnings to spacefaring adventures. Reaching for the stars is the first leg of a journey that involves death, rebirth, and the accumulation of knowledge as the driving force that governs all progress. The game presents mysteries of the universe as different strings to pluck and tug at, like investigating why all the endemic life on a planet disappeared, or the origins of the sentient alien life forms on another planet.

At the center of this design is a 20-minute timer, which resets the universe on a schedule, returning your character to their home planet to launch off yet again and resume your investigation. While you lose very little, you gain more knowledge with each run, and slowly start pulling at those mysterious strings that unravel the mysteries of the game in grander fashion. The space exploration game tries to simultaneously evoke the tight design of a linear adventure and the open-world freedom of No Man's Sky, a tenuous tightrope we have high hopes Outer Wilds can walk. **» *Imran Khan***

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Overcooked 2

It's time to throw ingredients on the internet

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC
Style: 1 to 4-Player Simulation (4-Player Online) **Publisher:** Team17
Developer: Ghost Town Games **Release:** August 7

The original Overcooked felt like an out-of-nowhere success. This newcomer was a good reminder that couch co-op is an underserved genre and that challenge is absolutely welcome as long as the base mechanics are easy to understand. Even if you're a bad cook, everyone knows how to cook, and developer Ghost Town Games turned it into a compelling video game.

For part two, the wheel is not being re-invented. You still play as a chef, it's still all about managing workflow in a crowded kitchen, and it's still a lot of fun. The story previously served as a goofy underlying conceit to frame why a series of cooks would need to perform their job to save the world, and that doesn't change here. The Onion King has accidentally brought the dead to life by reading the Necronomnomicon. Cooking can apparently undo his mistake.

Overcooked 2 brings the game online for the first time, but couch co-op continues to be the main draw. New cooks, recipes, and kitchens mix things up, but it also introduces new mechanics like controllable platforms and portals. On paper it seems like a small change, but arguably the biggest improvement is the ability to throw ingredients. In our hands-on, this element made it feel most like a true sequel. Certain levels introduce gaps where food must be thrown across, and it has the added potential to speed up workflow. Chucking your diced tomatoes to a nearby partner is much faster than walking it up to them.

Overcooked 2 is undeniably more Overcooked, but the mix-ups to the kitchens, the new chef options (I like the unicorn with rainbow hair), online play, and the ability to toss ingredients make us eager to return to The Onion Kingdom later this year. **» *Kyle Hilliard***

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Soulcalibur VI

The Butcher of Blaviken joins the fray

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PC **Style:** 1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online) **Publisher:** Bandai Namco
Developer: Project Soul **Release:** October 19

Last year, Tekken 7 found enormous success by bringing the series' tried-and-true formula to modern consoles with a few major tweaks that ratcheted up the tension of its hectic fights, as well as some interesting crossover characters. Soulcalibur VI looks to do the same for Project Soul's longstanding series, and the results have us craving more of its arcadey brand of sword fighting.

The most notable roster addition this time around is The Witcher's Geralt of Rivia. Geralt's mix of sword slinging and magic signs is a great fit for the series, and his play style matches his methodical approach to fights. His signs give him several long-range tools; his Agni and Aard signs act as follow ups to moves that edge him closer to his opponent, and his Quen sign gives him some quick protection as he delivers an overhead blow. Yrden also works as a Guard Impact, deflecting attacks. He also swaps to his silver sword for certain attacks, and his swords have different-colored wind streaks.

This mix of abilities makes him a defensive-oriented character. He won't beat Nightmare or Mitsurugi head-on and isn't nimble enough to keep up with speedier characters like Maxi and Taki, and instead must find a careful balance between staying far afield of his opponent and striking at the right time. Many of his moves, like one that starts with a combat roll then transitions into an upward strike, make it easy to land a hit on an unsuspecting opponent. I found the most success when I reacted to my opponent's moves and countered with whatever gap-closer seemed to work best.

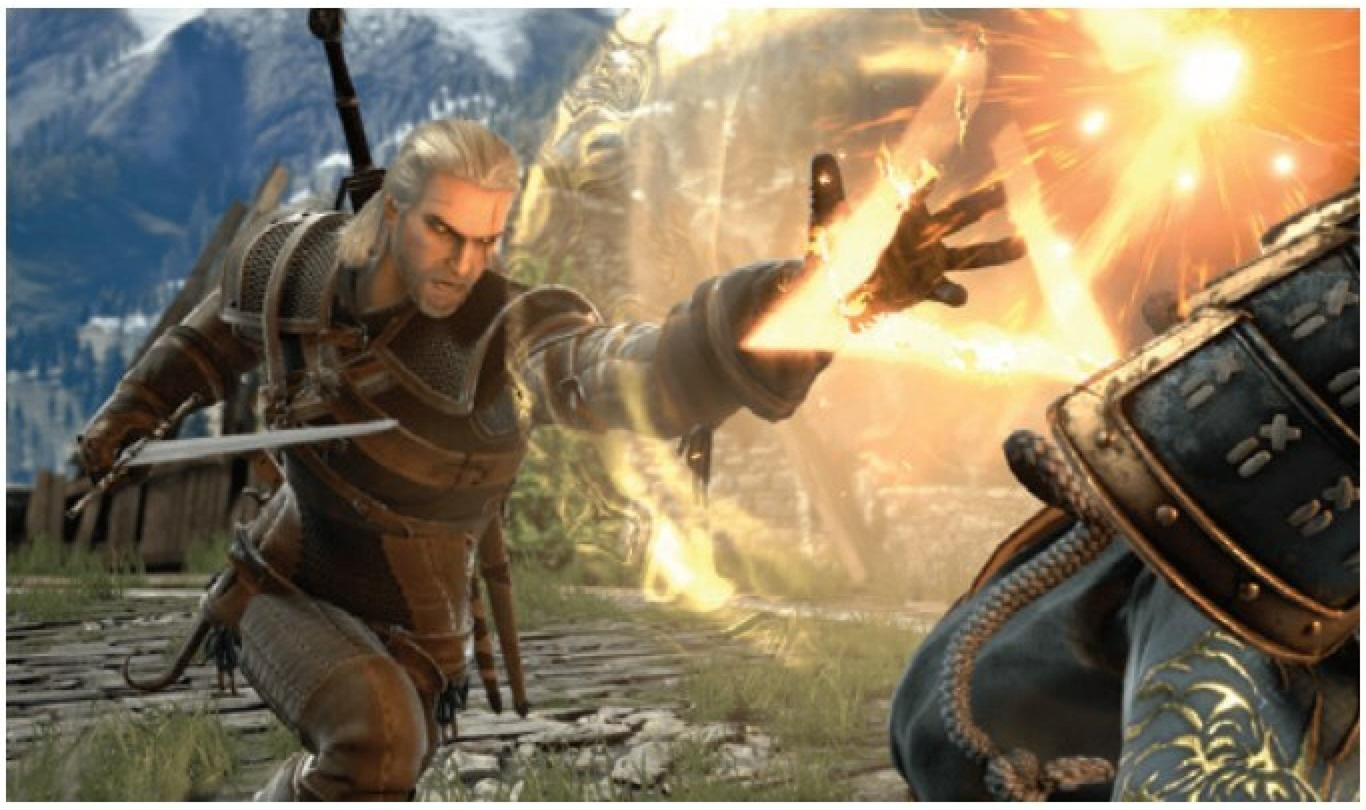
If you're not a Witcher fan, the biggest change is the new Reversal Edge technique, which works as a great way to give newer players an out against stronger ones. Landing one forces a rock-paper-scissors scenario between both players, where a vertical attack beats a horizontal, one, a kick beats a vertical attack, and a horizontal attack beats a kick. A well-versed player should be able to see a Reversal Edge coming, but it should give newer players a go-to option when they see their chance to catch their opponent pulling off unsafe manuvuers but haven't intuited the "proper" counter for them.

Similar to Tekken 7, Soulcalibur VI also adds a new way to use your meter. While Critical Edges act as super moves that deal high damage, Soul Charges are more defensive and strategic. When activated, they act as a defensive burst, pushing the enemy away. They also transform your character, and increase the damage of each hit. This makes Soul Gauge management more crucial than ever, and in my matches I regularly kept an eye on my meter and re-assessed my options depending on how much I had.

Project Soul is also bringing some of the heightened visual flourishes that make Tekken 7 such a great spectator sport. The slow-mo zoom ins from that title also appear in Soulcalibur VI, and are joined by Lethal Hits. When landed, moves with the Lethal Hit property send the opponent flying, adding an extra oomph to a good read on your opponent. Not knowing which moves had the property, I was always shocked at seeing my opponent (or myself) sent several feet into the air, and it made for some good laughs.

While I was able to land some impromptu combos during my hands-on time, Soulcalibur VI looks to continue the series' focus on short exchanges as you try to make quick reads on your opponent and find the best answer. The changes to combat widen the number of options at your disposal, and I was never left clueless as to how to beat certain moves. That, along with the chance to polish my skills as Geralt, gives me plenty of hope this new entry will restore the glory of Bandai Namco's other 3D fighting series when it hits this October. » **Suriel Vazquez**

Soulcalibur VI will include a story mode, highlighting indivual characters



Total War: Three Kingdoms

Settling grudge matches with Qiangs

Platform: *PC* **Style:** *1-Player Strategy (Online TBA)* **Publisher:** *Sega* **Developer:** *Creative Assembly* **Release:** *2019*

After few forays into the world of Warhammer, Creative Assembly has once again sets it sights on the world of history, specifically the history of warfare and conquests. While the developer has taken on the many popular eras in history, like medieval Europe, feudal Japan, and the Roman Empire, its latest title marks the first time in over a decade Creative Assembly is embracing a new era. This time, the latest Total War game is all about ancient Chinese warfare.

While all the Total War staples you know are here, including a detailed world map that lets you make realpolitik plays or try your hand at crushing anyone who rises against you, there are a few new features here for returning fans who want more than the bread and butter. Much of Three Kingdoms focuses on *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, a novel that lionized historical military personnel like Lu Bu into figures of myth, almost demi-human characters with unquenchable lust for power and different skill sets.

Three Kingdoms lets you pair generals, such as Cao Cao and Dong Zhuo, together during battles. As the relationship between generals grows, they get boosts during battle when working together. However, it can also run in the opposite direction, with your characters getting so sick of one another that it demoralizes troops or, in some cases, they leave your army, betraying you to work for your rival.

Total War looks to be more of the same with a few twists, which isn't necessarily a bad thing. The series has persisted for years as one of the popular strategy games. With its personality-focused mechanics, Three Kingdoms could emerge as one of the best historical entries this storied series has to offer. » ***Javy Gwaltney***

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Student work by: John Rogeles & George Stoll

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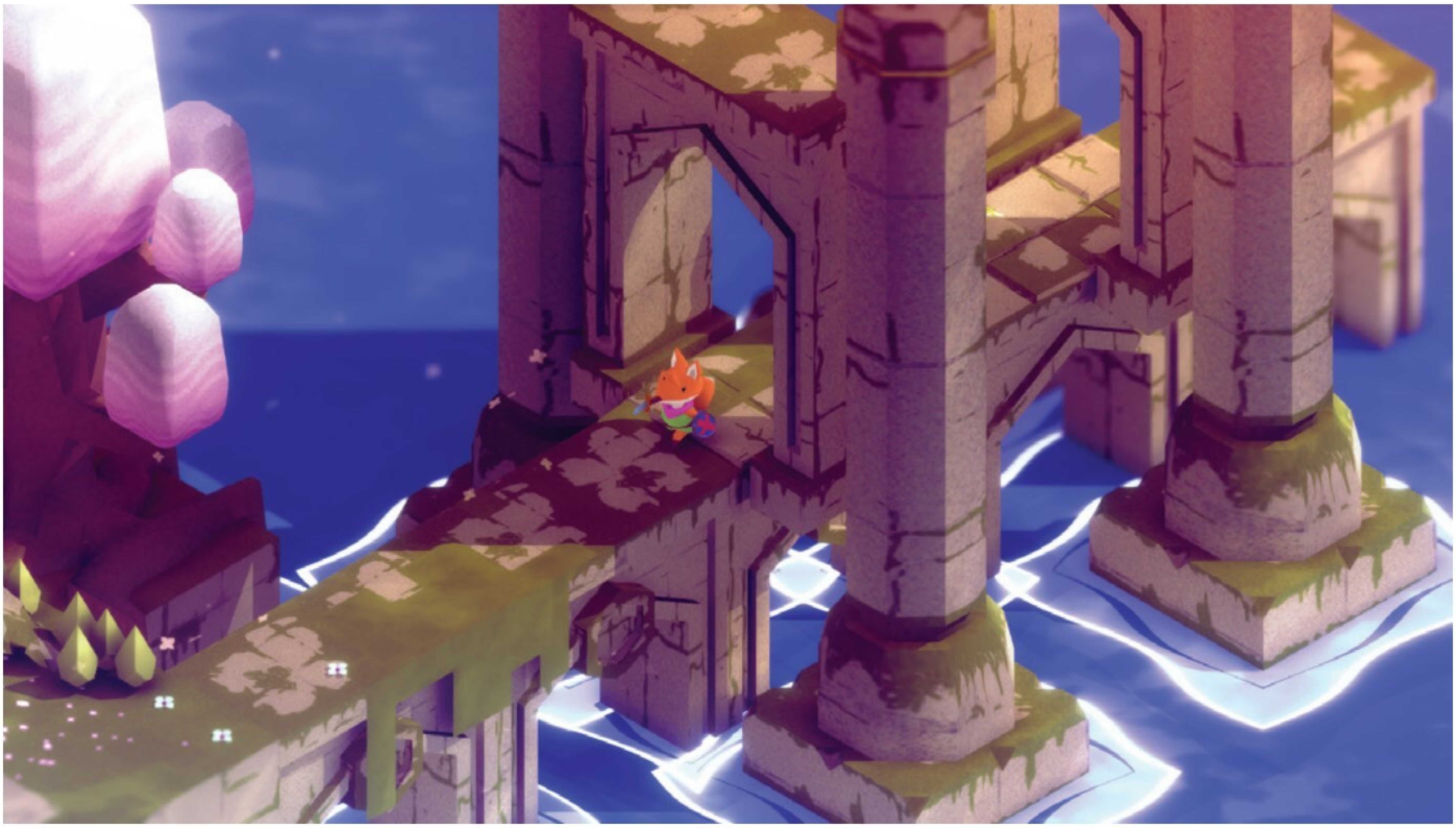
Tunic

A link to the past and the future

Platform: Xbox One, PC **Style:** 1-Player Action **Publisher:** Finji **Developer:** Andrew Shouldice **Release:** 2019



We've had Tunic on our radar for a while now, and every time we see it, it looks all the more enticing. An unabashed Zelda clone, Tunic follows the adventures of one brave fox armed with sword and shield, as players explore a "world from long ago." The beautiful, lo-fi polygonal art immediately sets it apart from the pack, with the visuals creating a combination that somehow manages to suggest cutesy and sleek.

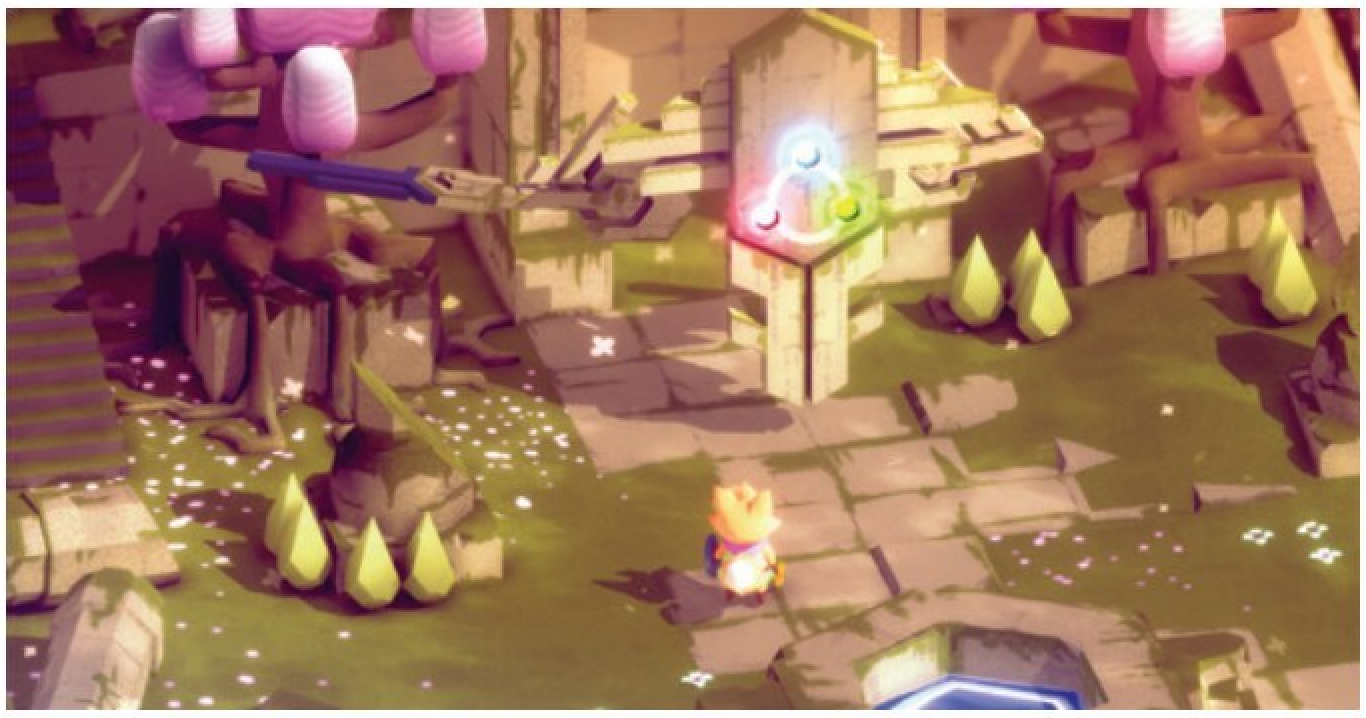
The impressive preview build we saw of Tunic gets across the game's strongest quality (so far): a sense of unbelonging. The world the fox navigates is beautiful, but also extremely deadly. Signposts are written in a mysterious, illegible language, often hinting to some vague danger or treasure ahead. Certain items you might consider necessary, like the fox's shield and sword, are not items that you receive just by playing through the story but instead are items you have to seek out. According to developer Andrew Shouldice, you could feasibly play through the whole game with only a stick to aid you.

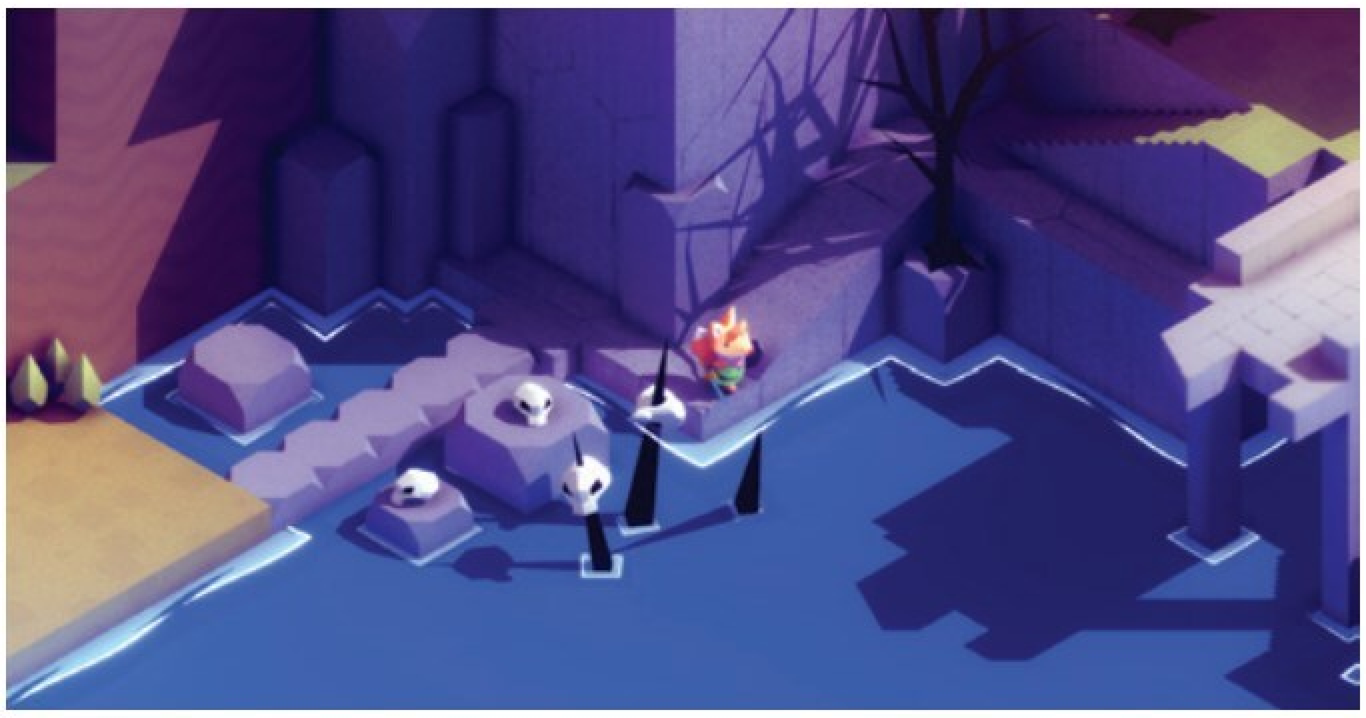
The monsters that stand in the player's way are similar to the fox in that they're cutesy things that hop around and don't seem that deadly initially. However, these animals are far more dangerous than they look, often surging toward the fox. You must memorize patterns and make the evade button your best friend if you hope to survive Tunic's surprisingly hardcore offerings.

And that's not even taking the bosses into account.

Shouldice ended the demo by showcasing a boss fight against a massive series of cracked, sentient stone tablets that moved quickly and decimated the fox with a massive stomp and laser combination. Players who love difficult boss fights may find themselves hurling their controllers in a potent combination of ecstasy and anger while playing.

Tunic has no release date outside of 2019, so we may be waiting a while before we get to explore this intriguing little world, but it's shaping up to be one of the most promising indies on the horizon. » ***Javy Gwaltney***





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We Happy Few

The joy is spreading

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PC **Style:** 1-Player Action
Publisher: Gearbox Publishing **Developer:** Compulsion Games
Release: August 10

Two years ago, We Happy Few showed a narrative-heavy sequence where the player character rejects his government-mandated hallucinogenic "Joy" pills and opts to see the world for what it really is. However, Early Access players were disappointed to find the actual game was more about freeform survival. Compulsion Games has rectified this, injecting a new focus on narrative to strong results.

In We Happy Few, you play as three unique characters trying to discover the mysteries of the British island of Wellington Wells. Following World War II, Wellington Wells is cut off from the rest of the world, and as a result is rife with intrigue.

The dystopian city seems happy on the surface, but is actually closer to collapse than prosperity. The characters you control have the option of fighting back or fitting in, but if my demo is any indication, the characters don't like individuality.

The survival mechanics like hunger, thirst, and fatigue are still present, but my entire demo was guided by a story. The segment guides me through a gang hideout (complete with a fighting pit), a ravaged town, and an abandoned subway tunnel, giving me a strong sense of what to expect. Much of my demo is spent in stealth, moving from bush to bush outside and creeping around corners just out of sight of enemies.

Once I'm inevitably spotted, combat lets you block, attack, or push enemies. Based on what you have equipped (and what is being swung at your head), your block varies in its effectiveness; your forearm is a poor shield for a metal shovel. After stockpiling items like bandages, rags, and bobby pins, I use the menu-based crafting system to create healing items and lockpicks.

It's rare to see a game so drastically improve between demos. With around 20 hours of story-based content promised, We Happy Few went from a game I had little interest in to one I can't wait to dive into.
» Brian Shea

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Lego DC Super-Villains

It's good to be bad

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, Switch
Style: 1 or 2-Player Action **Publisher:** TT Games
Developer: Traveller's Tales **Release:** October 16

Players have long been able to engage in mischief in TT Games' Lego titles, smashing furniture and other objects into oblivion, but Lego DC Super-Villains marks the first time that the narrative has your back. Better yet, a variety of quality-of-life improvements help guide players through the mayhem a little more effectively.

When I start the demo, I'm immediately confronted with one of the biggest tweaks to the familiar Lego template. It kicks off with a character-creation screen, in which I build up my own supervillain. Players have long been able to build and modify their own minifigs, but that element has been sidelined to free-play and exploration modes. Here, your custom creation is a factor in the story, and as it progresses they become more and more powerful.

The opening level is set in Stryker's Island, where a host of bad guys are working to rescue my newly formed villain from imprisonment. The basic beats are familiar, as I run through the facility with Lex Luthor and Mercy, smashing objects and beating up guards until they disassemble. A number of little improvements reveal themselves throughout, such as when I encounter moments where I need to swap characters to progress. Now the system automatically swaps control to the appropriate character.

Platforming is a little stickier, too. Head of design Arthur Parsons says his team is working to eliminate unnecessary obstacles that keep players from progressing through the game, which is great news for people who like to play with a younger co-op buddy. **» Jeff Cork**

ICEBERG LOUNGE

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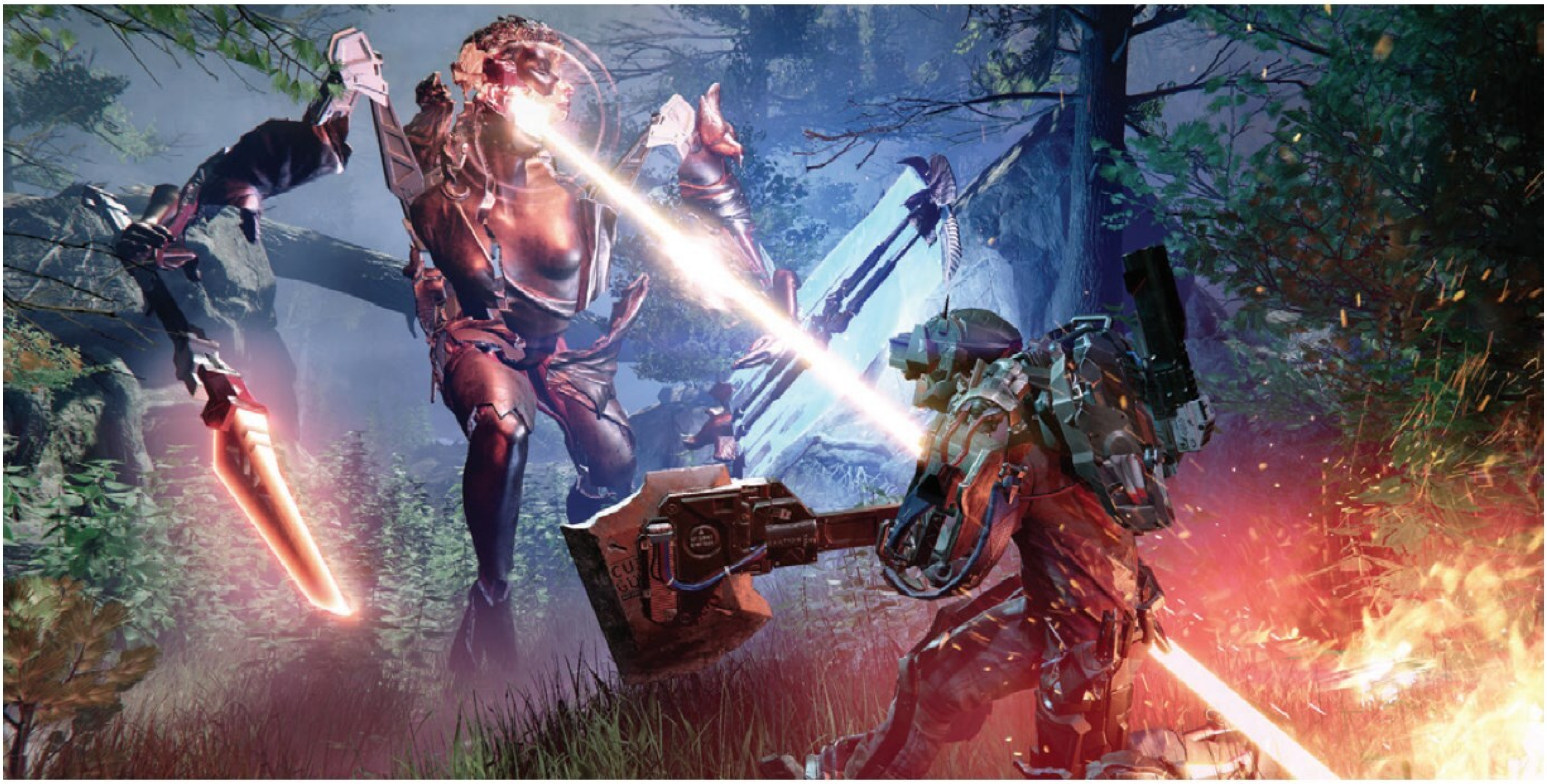
The Surge 2

Chopping like never before

Platform: *PS4, Xbox One, PC* **Style:** *1-Player Action* **Publisher:** *Focus Home Interactive* **Developer:** *Deck 13* **Release:** *2019*



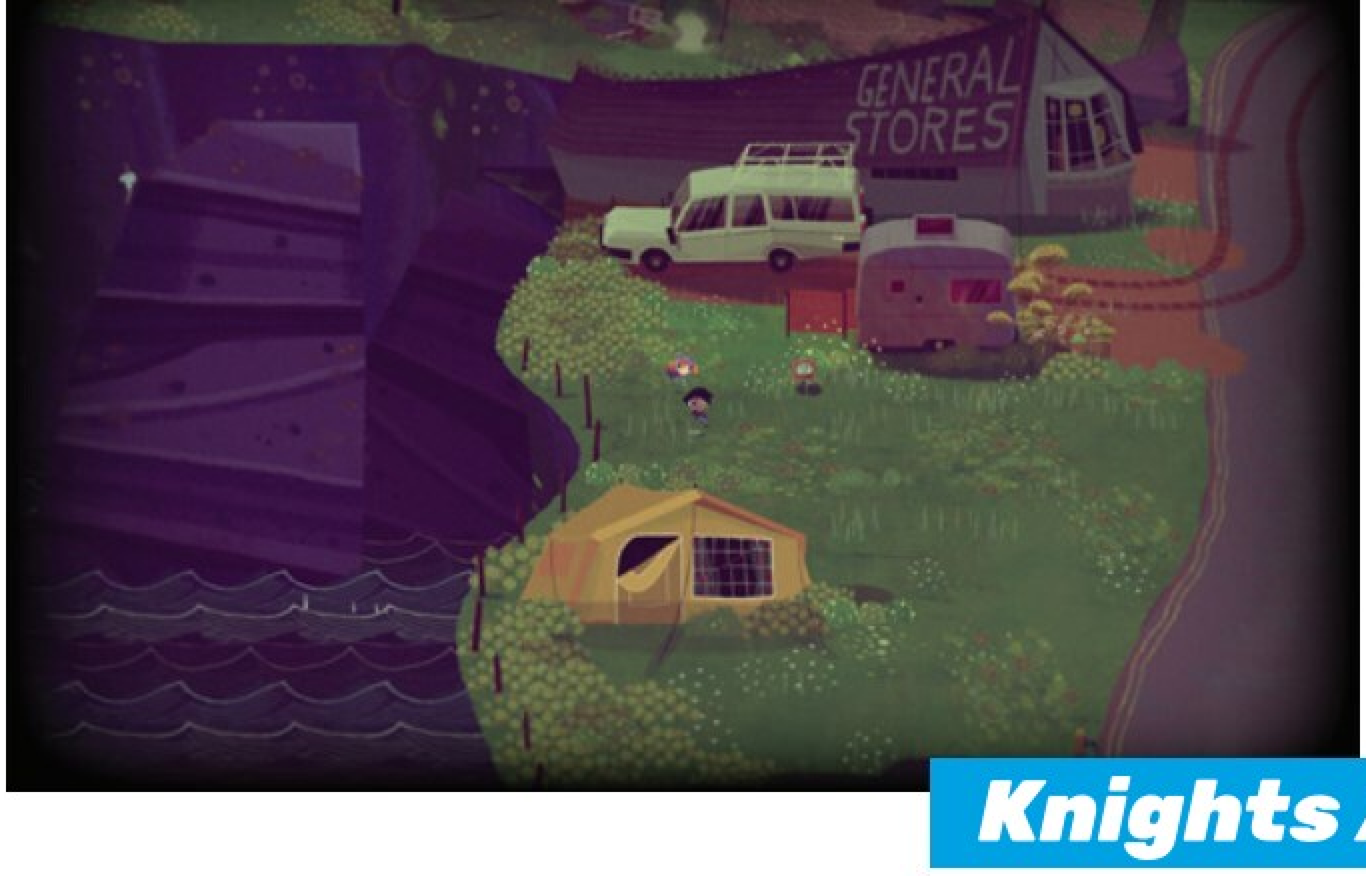
The Surge was a sci-fi Souls-like game with a promising concept, putting you in the shoes of a disabled man who finds mobility and super powers thanks to an exoskeleton. The combat system, which required you to dismember certain limbs from robotic enemies to gain their powers, was a novel twist on Dead Space's limb-targeting system, but everything else fell short of the game's potential. The story was forgettable, the environments repetitious, and the enemy designs were ho-hum.

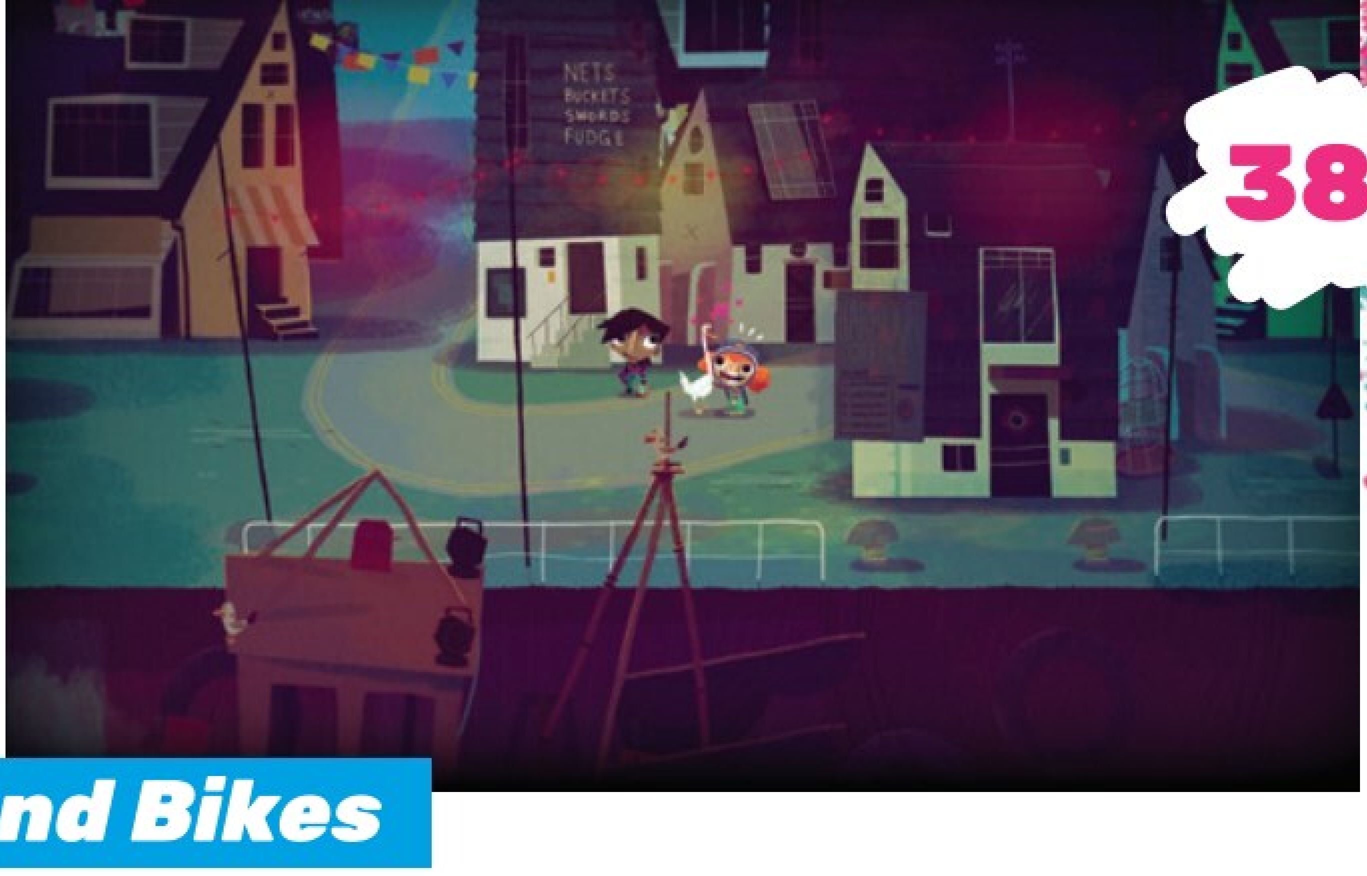
With The Surge 2, Deck 13 has taken all of those criticisms to heart and is working to make a fantastic action title. The extended demo we saw focused on a used-created character navigating the city of Jericho, a futuristic metropolis that has a ragged green portal far above it for plot reasons that Deck 13 wouldn't address. During the presentation, the demoer explored an adjacent park that was "completely synthetic," and built as a haven for the rich to go to when they wanted to get away from the poor. During this jaunt, we saw our character get into several duels with exosuit-wearing mercs who could briefly go invisible to evade our hero.

The combat, much like the first game, is meaty in more ways than one. The demoer's character uses a long axe they can break apart into dual blades at a whim, and they often use it to break foes' guard stances. Finishers are particularly bloody, with enemies having limbs cleaved from their bodies or literally being torn in two. At one point, the demoer absorbs an upgrade that allows them to summon a drone capable of attacking foes for light damage and even stunning bosses.

Keeping in line with its Dark Souls influence, The Surge 2 features difficult boss fights that force you to learn their patterns and adapt. The boss we saw in our demo was a huge statue capable of turning into a spear-wielding guardian that hits hard. Deck 13 says it's working to give players multiple avenues to take down these special foes. Our hero uses their drone and a superpowered attack to destroy the guardian's shield before laying into them and felling the foe with a barrage of strikes, with the baddie being vaporized in an impressive explosion.

Deck 13 isn't playing around when it comes to fixing the problems of the previous game, attempting to address all the complaints with The Surge as well as expanding a number of features, like bumping up the weapon types from five to ten. With a new environment and deadlier battles, we look forward to cutting and chopping foes for hours on end once more when The Surge 2 launches next year. » ***Javy Gwaltney***





Knights And Bikes

Friendship: the video game

Platform: *PS4, PC* **Style:** *1 or 2-Player Action (2-Player Online)* **Publisher:** *Double Fine Productions* **Developer:** *Foam Sword* **Release:** *Fall*

Knights and Bikes isn't being developed by Double Fine, but it's easy to understand why the studio behind games like Psychonauts and Broken Age would back the title. The game's whimsical sense of humor and adventurous ideals fit in perfectly with Double Fine's sensibilities.

In Knights and Bikes you play as Nessa or Demelza (or both if you're playing single-player), an imaginative pair of friends who are on a mission to save their island. The two girls exist in the real world, but paint everything they see with a fantasy overlay. When they're talking to an adult in need of assistance – you see it play out like they're speaking to a king who is sending them on a mission. They're not fighting with a trash compactor – it's a fire breathing dragon. The aesthetic is immediately engaging; seeing their imagination visualized on top of the real world is undeniably charming.

Both Nessa and Demelza have customizable bikes they use to move around the world, but in my hands-on, I hit a point where I had to leave the bikes behind and crawl through a hole in a chain link fence. Thankfully, I found a giant scrapyard magnet arm on the other side that I used pick up our bikes and bring them over. Along with puzzles like these, you also engage in combat. I used a frisbee to take out a robot's hands and poured water from a teapot on flaming enemies. You can also perform attacks like stomping in a puddle to create a shockwave around you.

The game infuses typically dull traversal moments with charming imagination. While moving from one point to another, Nessa and Demelza arbitrarily kicked off a bike race proclaiming whoever got to the destination first got to use the second scrap yard magnet first.

Knights and Bikes seeks to emulate the childhood adventure experience and it is doing so with an impressive style all its own. **»** ***Kyle Hilliard***

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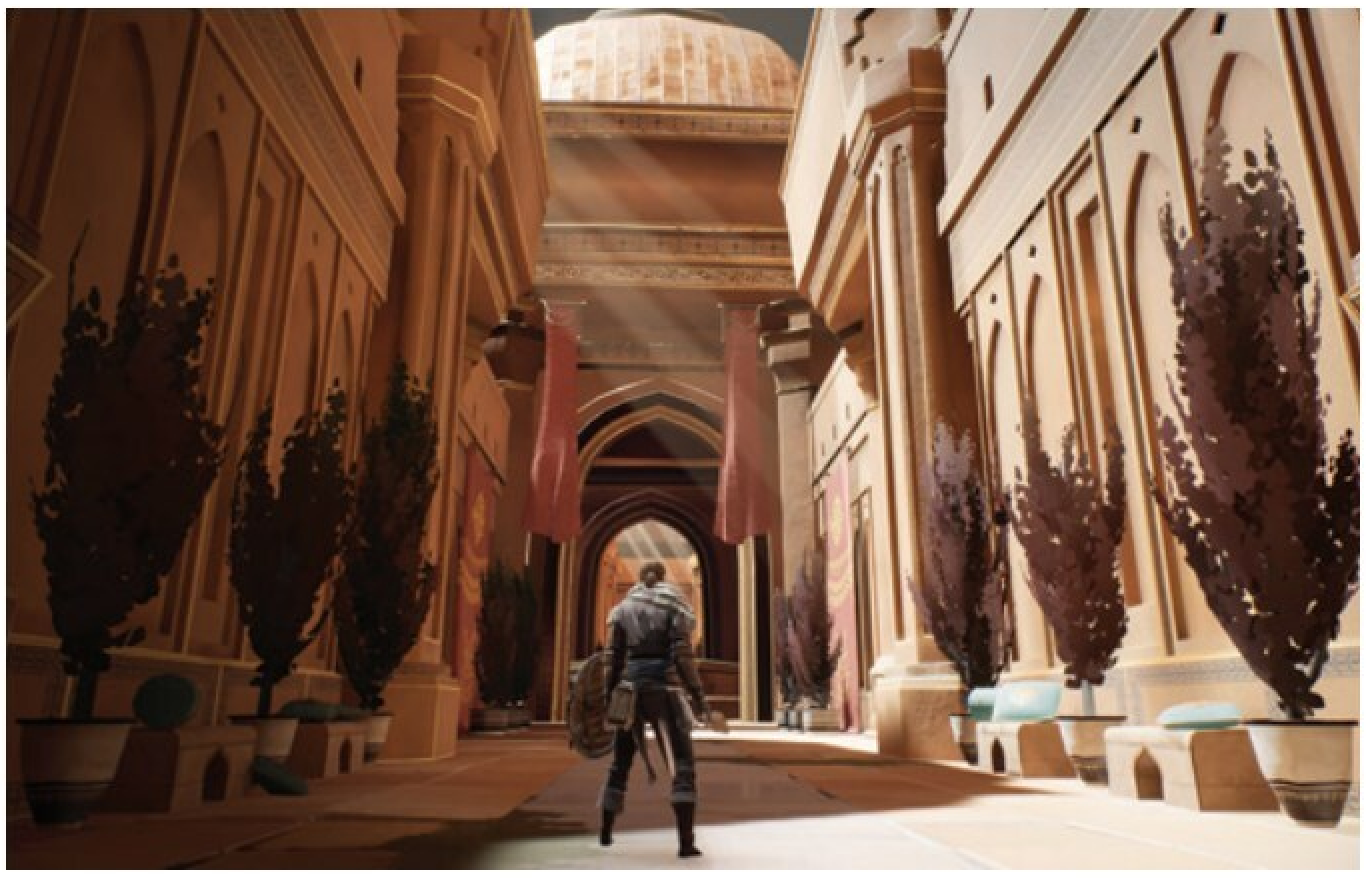
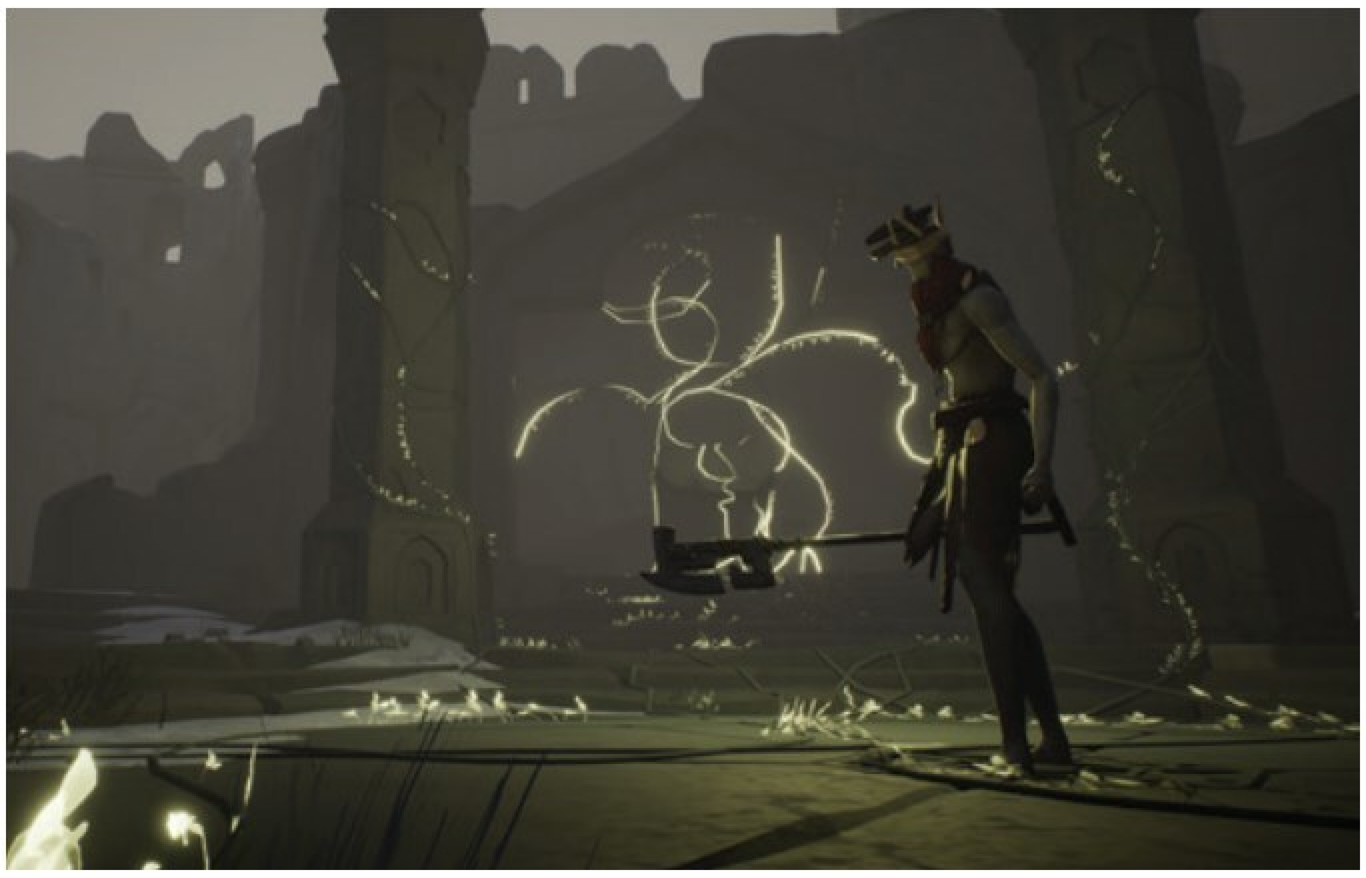
Ashen

A beautiful descent

Platform: *Xbox One, PC* ***Style:*** *1-Player Action/Role-Playing* ***Publisher:*** *Annapurna Interactive* ***Developer:*** *Aurora44* ***Release:*** *2018*





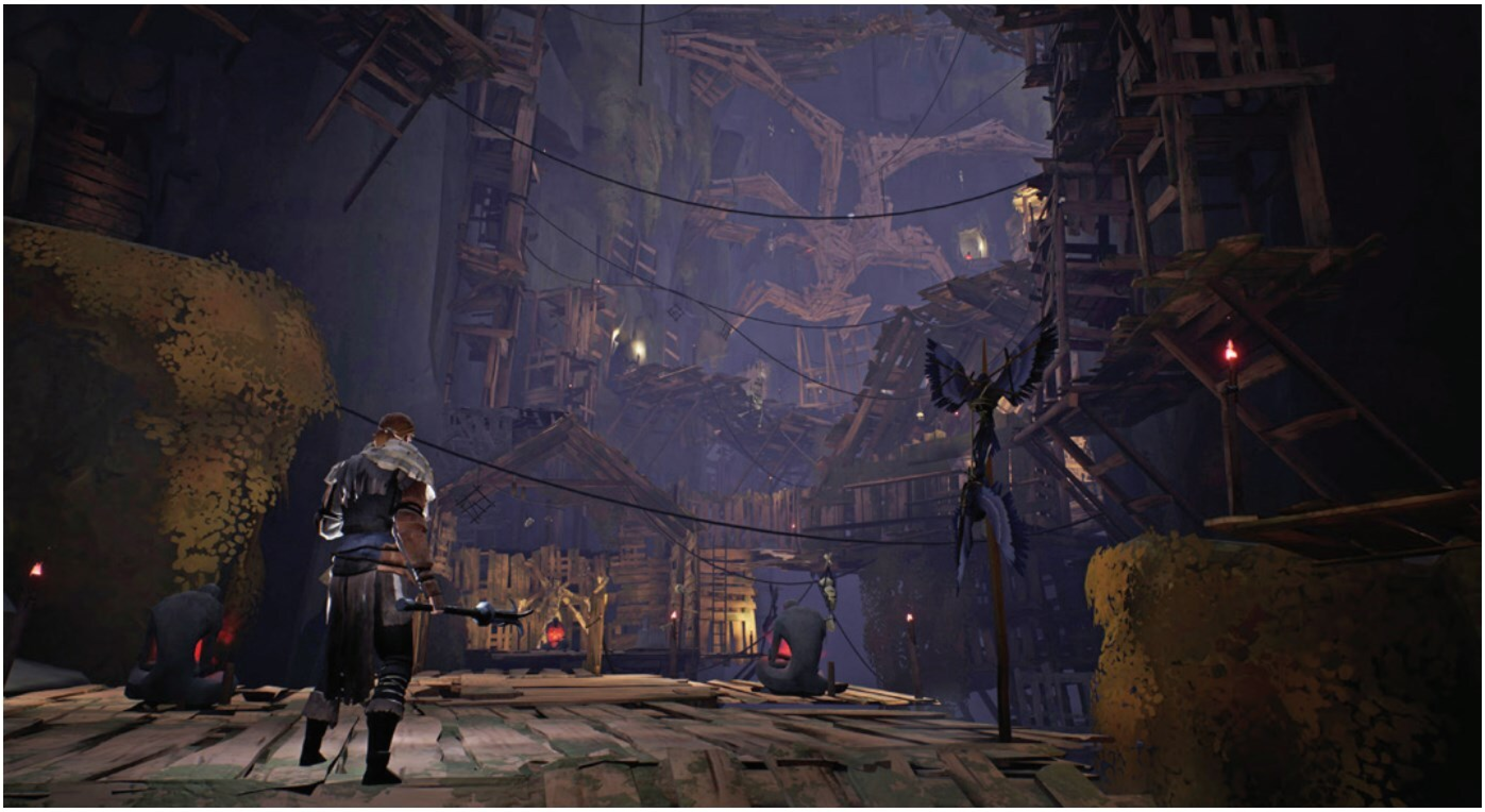
From Software's seminal Souls series has had many clones over the years, most of them looking to emulate the excruciatingly difficult boss fights. However, Ashen wields that influence in another way, presenting an alluring world that's easy to get lost in. We played a small piece of Aurora44's mysterious adventure and appreciated the Nordic, painterly visuals as we roamed ash-covered stone and darkness in search of a way out.

Ashen has bold ambitions. A passive multiplayer system means it's possible to run into other players in the world. How do you interact with them? Lead them to your camp? Trust them? Forge an alliance? While we saw little of this mechanic in the demo, there is a lot of promise rooted in the idea of building a settlement with other survivors in this world to better face the odds.

The combat in Ashen is satisfying and stamina-based. We took out several bandits with well-timed ax strikes, cutting through flesh and bone, and then looting their corpses. Behind us, our footsteps echoed through the valleys, making the world feel much bigger than it actually is.

We're curious about where Ashen's story leads. Are we in hell, maybe limbo? What is our group of survivors working toward besides surviving, if anything? A barest hint of a lengthy journey teased us in the segment we played, something that could unfold into a memorable, epic adventure.

We enjoyed what we played of Aurora44's beautiful adventure and are rattling our brains in search of answers to the many questions posed by its world. We won't have to wait too long to get those answers, as the game's due out before the end of the year. We hope to see this lovely, melancholic underdog live up to its potential and lofty ambitions. **»** ***Javy Gwaltney***



40

Skull & Bones

Opening the sails

Platform: *PS4, Xbox One, PC*
Style: *Online Multiplayer Action* **Publisher:** *Ubisoft*
Developer: *Ubisoft Singapore* **Release:** *2019*

Assassin's Creed fans wishing the series would return focus to the open seas should be excited for Skull & Bones. In Ubisoft's upcoming pirate game, you customize your ship and set out to battle other captains in enhanced naval combat.

I was dumped on a server full of players and NPCs with the goal of finding treasure. You obtain success by any means necessary; I tried taking on low-level NPC ships, but that plan backfired when they called their higher-level friends.

You can also form a temporary fleet with other players, which disables friendly fire as long as you're teamed up. This becomes a necessity when powerful bounty hunters set course for your location.

Skull & Bones' high-seas combat is hectic and exciting. We'll find out if it's deep enough to hold our attention next year. » ***Brian Shea***

41

Spyro Reignited Trilogy

Sweet nostalgia

Platform: *PS4, Xbox One* **Style:** *1-Player Action*
Publisher: *Activision* **Developer:** *Toys for Bob*
Release: *September 21*

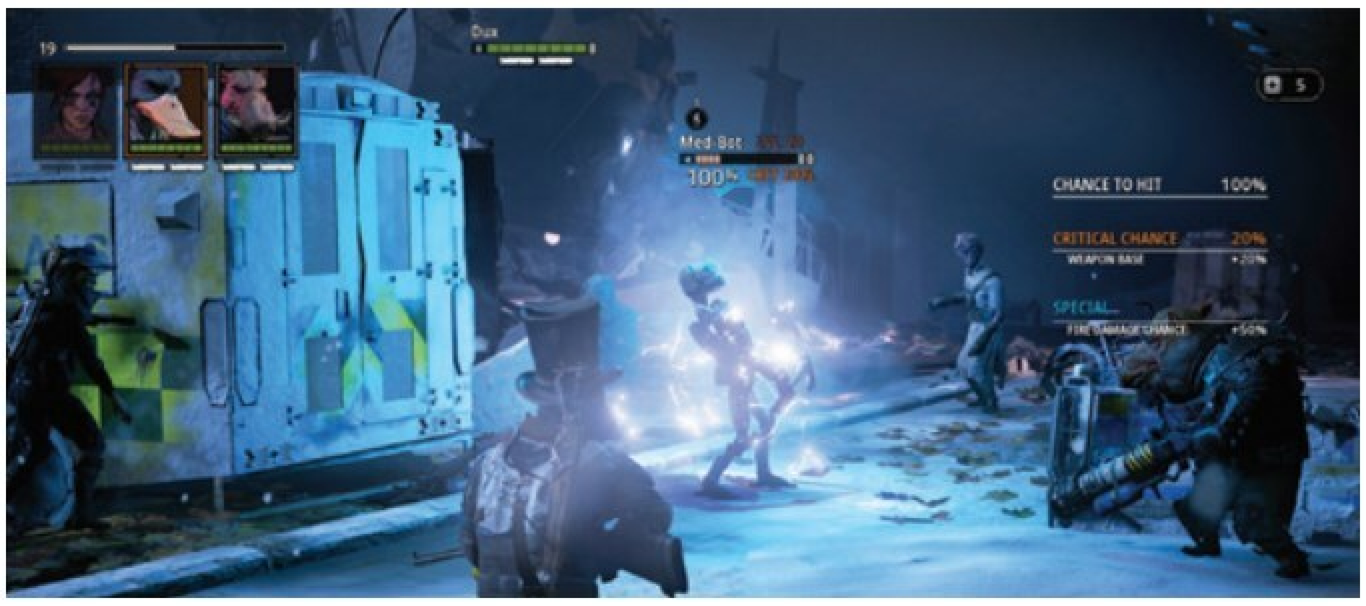
Spyro Reignited Trilogy was playable at this year's E3, giving showgoers the chance to soar through the Tree Tops level from the original Spyro the Dragon game. Within seconds of getting my hands on the controller, I was gliding from island to island with ease, hitting the Super Charge ramps to gain great speed, and blasting everything in sight with the purple dragon's flame breath. The new analog-based controls allow for a great level of precision, which comes in handy when making speed dashes through tight quarters. While the level is light on geometry, the new lighting and texture work almost make this remake look like an entirely different game. » ***Andrew Reiner***

42

Mutant Year Zero: Road To Eden

Don't mock this duck

Platform: *PS4, Xbox One, PC* **Style:** *1-Player Strategy* **Publisher:** *Funcom* **Developer:** *The Bearded Ladies* **Release:** *2018*



The pen & paper RPG Mutant has been around for over 30 years. Its funhouse mirror version of a post-apocalyptic future envisions a world full of anthropomorphic animals and mutated humans with superhuman abilities. This year, a group of ex-Hitman and Payday developers are taking Mutant's spin on the apocalypse and combining it with XCOM-style combat and free roaming exploration. Based on our hands-on demo at E3, it's a potentially potent cocktail.

Like Firaxis' tactical masterpiece, you control a team of warriors as they angle for cover and try to outmaneuver their opponents. However, each team member is a named character who has an important role in Mutant Year Zero's story. Since all of these characters are mutants, they also have exotic skills that come in handy during combat. For example, Dux is an anthropomorphic duck with a silent crossbow who can fly into the air to get a better line of sight on his foes. Selma is a mutant human, and we used her vine powers to pin an enemy in place for one round. Meanwhile, Bormin is a tank-like boar who has a charging attack that demolishes cover and sends enemies to their knees.

Between battles, I explore the environment and search for extra scrap, med packs, and ammo. More importantly, I get the drop on a few enemies. Gameplay seamlessly transitions between exploration and combat, so if you silently take down enemies on the fringe of an encampment, you thin the heard and will have an easier time when you eventually alert the group.

The demo we played offered a substantial challenge, but The Bearded Ladies say they're still fine-tuning the difficulty for a final release later this year. » ***Ben Reeves***

43

Metro Exodus

Ample time to work out the kinks

Platform: *PS4, Xbox One, PC* **Style:** *1-Player Shooter*
Publisher: *Deep Silver* **Developer:** *4A Games*
Release: *February 22*

The Metro Exodus E3 2018 demo was based on the same content we saw back in February for the March cover story, giving the world its first chance to see the boundary-pushing graphics, unforgiving gameplay, and ambitious transition from the linear-focused Metro underground to the harsh, more open Russian countryside that convinced us to put the game on our cover. Running at 4K on the Xbox One X console, the game's beauty won over many at the show. But the demo wasn't without its share of hiccups.

The shooting felt good, and all of the game's systems were online, but we noticed a few rough spots as well. Collision issues made moving across the countryside more burdensome than it should be, framerate drops disrupted the gameplay, and the rowboat Artyom uses to explore the Volga River region outside Moscow was tough to steer. When we brought these issues up to executive producer Jon Bloch, he said the team is keenly aware of the current build's shortcomings, and they have more than enough time to hone the experience.

"We've never shown Metro on a console this early before, and we felt like it was appropriate for showing off this content on Xbox One X in 4K – it's already there," Bloch says. "Yes, we have some polish to go, and yes, there's still some performance stuff to nail, but it's already in good shape, so trust us when we say this extra time really is focused on polish. We're not still making the game at this point, we're smoothing it out."

Given 4A Game's strong track record, we're inclined to give them the benefit of the doubt that the game will be running smoothly by deadline. It will need to be considering it's launching on the same day as highly anticipated games like Anthem and Days Gone. » ***Matt Bertz***

44

Trials Rising

Back on the bike

Platform: *PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC* **Style:** *1 or 2-Player Racing (4-Player Racing)* **Publisher:** *Ubisoft* **Developer:** *Ubisoft RedLynx, Ubisoft Kiev, Ubisoft Odessa* **Release:** *February*

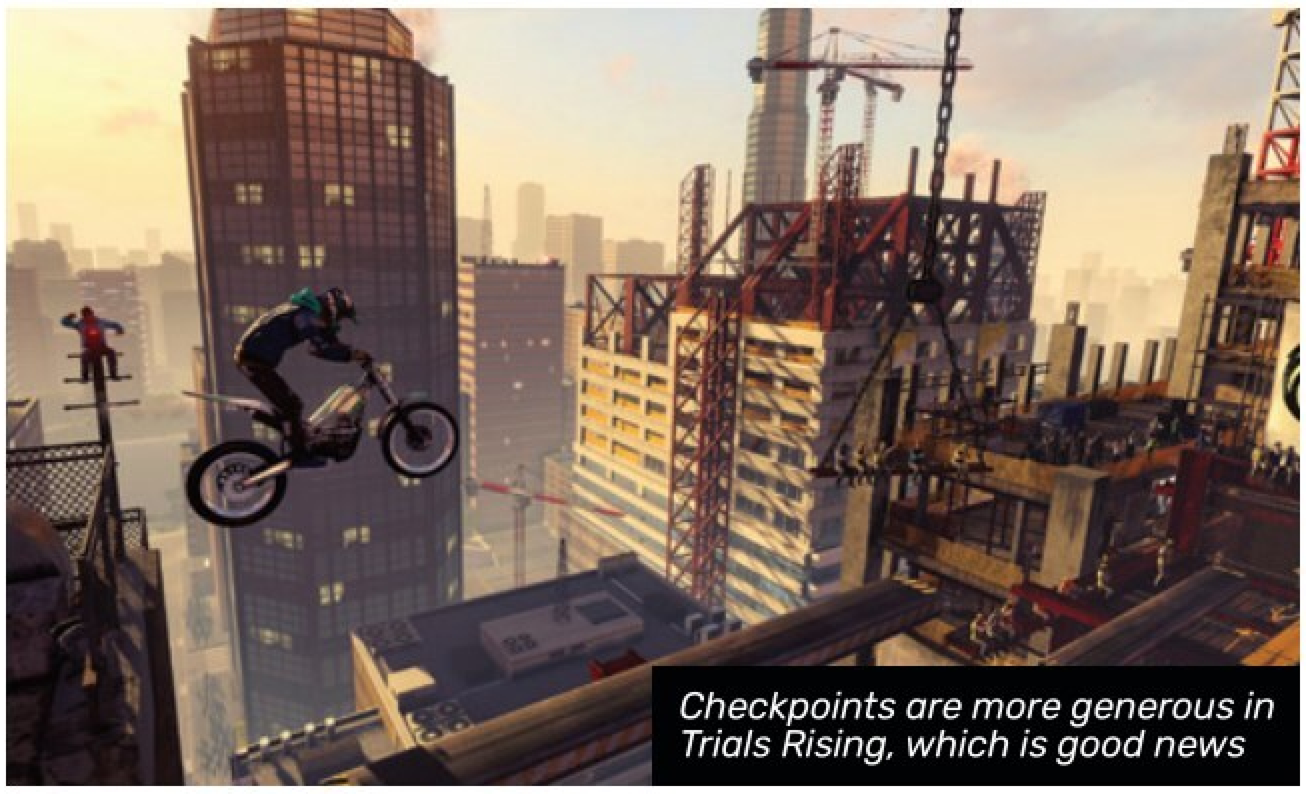
As long as gamers keep riding their bikes into chasms and hitting explosive barrels, there will be more grueling-yet-exhilarating Trials stages.Trials Rising is the first main entry in the bike obstacle game in five years, and while it is no less unforgiving or fun than previous titles, it also has some contemporary updates.

The game has lost none of its physics-based charm, demanding players coax the most out of their bikes to climb, jump, and bunny hop their way through exacting 2.5D courses around the world. Each stage offers a selection of bikes, and depending on your abilities, some are more suitable than others depending on the rider. The heavier, less responsive bikes require less nuanced throttle inputs, but at the cost of the zip that often makes some inclines easier.

Choice extends to your avatar, from their clothes to victory animation, and clothes and bike skins can be shared with others – as can player-built tracks. The better you do, particularly in sponsorship challenges, the more customization items you earn.

Multiplayer is also branching out, with options for ghosts of real-players, online, and local play. The latter can include a tandem bike on certain courses. When using this bike both riders share the physics, acceleration, and braking of the entire bike. As in most co-op experiences, communication is important. A backflip when both parties don't get the timing right isn't a backflip – it's another in the many ways you can fail in Trials.

Trials Rising isn't a revolution of the formula that has taken the series this far. It's an entry that adds to the already satisfying experience (including easier onboarding for new players) despite the fact that perhaps the only thing you really need is a well-placed checkpoint. » ***Matthew Kato***



Checkpoints are more generous in Trials Rising, which is good news

45

Valkyria Chronicles 4

Planning for success

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, Switch
Style: 1-Player Strategy/Role-Playing
Publisher: Sega **Developer:** Sega **Release:** October 16

Valkyria Chronicles 4 feels like the return to form fans have been waiting for, bringing back the series' popular elements while also adding improvements to keep things fresh. This time around, you command Squad E as Claude Wallace, who enlists with a group of childhood friends. The strategic gameplay, where you use action points to move your units for superior positioning, is still at the core. An unpredictable battlefield means you must prepare for anything, whether it's weather affecting visibility or stumbling upon ersatz hiding places to get the jump on foes. Building relationships with your squad mates leads to co-op attacks and stat bonuses, giving you more options for battle. This checks all the right boxes for a new Valkyria game. » ***Kimberley Wallace***

46

Dragon Quest XI: Echoes Of An Elusive Age

A new beginning

Platform: PS4, PC **Style:** 1-Player Role-playing
Publisher: Square Enix **Developer:** Armor Project, Square Enix
Release: September 4

In many ways, Dragon Quest XI is an homage to the series. To commemorate the franchise's 30th anniversary, it was crafted with plenty of callbacks as its developers stuffed as much as possible from the series' history into one game. Its legacy can be seen by longtime fans who play XI, but this entry is also a new beginning to compete in the modern market and garner the interest of new fans.

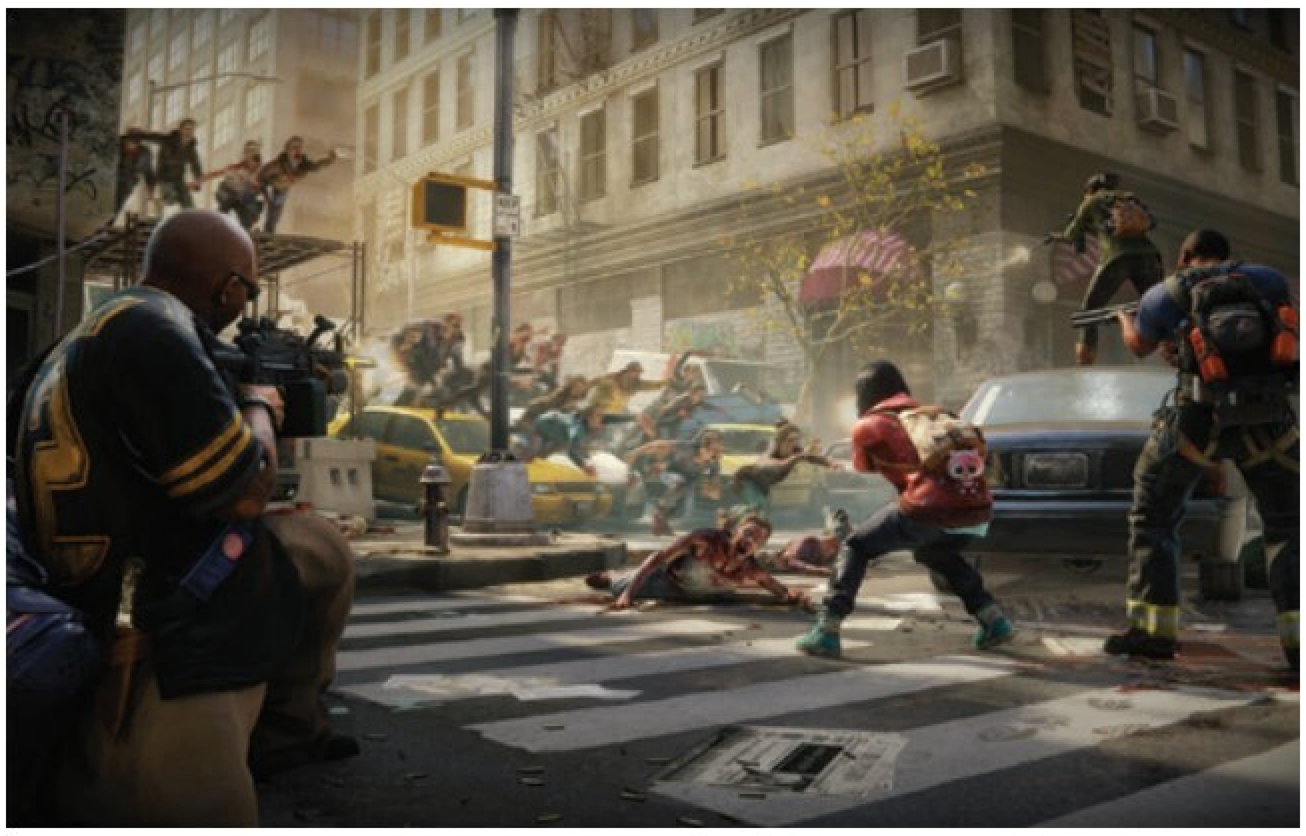
The developers have learned a lot along the way, bringing back crafting with the fun-sized forge for XI and improving elements like the streamlined skill system for XI. Still, the series never forgets it roots, sticking to its turn-based combat and sense of exploration. With better graphics and more detailed areas, we can't wait to dive into this vast world and slay some slimes. » ***Kimberley Wallace***

47

World War Z

Making the best part of the film into a game

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PC
Style: 1-Player Shooter (4-Player Online) **Publisher:** Saber Interactive
Developer: Saber Interactive **Release:** 2019



World War Z is not breaking new gaming ground. We've shot plenty of zombies with partners by our side, but that doesn't change the fact that this interactive take on the popular franchise surprised us. We left our session eager to play more.

Licensed specifically from the film of the same name, World War Z is a cooperative third-person shooter that takes clear inspiration from Left 4 Dead. For the structure of its narrative, however, it looks toward the book *World War Z* to deliver a series of smaller stories following disconnected characters as they try to survive the world-wide infection. You won't experience moments from the book, like the military's first catastrophic engagement with the zombie horde in the Battle of Yonkers, but you will see zombies visualized as they were in the film, like a horde of unstoppable ants.

My hands-on demo tasked me and three other players with making our way out of a mall. We started sneaky, but I set off a grenade that alerted the horde and they quickly surrounded us. As we made our way to the front of the mall, we got a chance to see Saber's impressive crowd tech in action. Looking out the front door from the second floor, we saw literally thousands of zombies closing in. Rather than use the stairs, the horde started piling up and climbing over itself to reach our platform. We worked together to thin the pile while one of our group stayed near the zombies' entry point to pick off the few that were able to make it over the ledge before making our way out.

The most compelling part of the *World War Z* film was how the zombies felt more like a collected horde than individual threats, and developer Saber Interactive has successfully emulated that for its game. To fight a new style of zombie in a familiar Left 4 Dead-style of game is exciting, and we're looking forward to seeing more of its stories. » ***Kyle Hilliard***

48

Madden NFL 19

A new way to form your franchise

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PC **Style:** 1 to 4-Player Sports (6-Player Online) **Publisher:** EA Sports **Developer:** EA Tiburon **Release:** August 10

Fans of Madden's traditional franchise mode have been asking for major changes to their favorite mode, and Madden 19 is doing just that in a shakeup to the way players progress. The move is somewhat controversial in that the focus shifts from applying points to individual attributes to putting skill points into broad archetype buckets and relying on the computer to progress your players for you. It's a simpler process that in some ways is more realistic, and it's going to demand you make some tough choices.

The core of the changes revolve around your team's offensive and defensive schemes, which can be changed. Each player and their positional archetypes fits, to some degree, in these schemes (such as Vertical Power Run or Base 4-3). For example, any of the Vertical offense schemes are better fits for quarterbacks with the Strong Arm archetype.

Players with archetypes that fit into their team's scheme get bonuses to their progression, while those that don't won't improve as fast. The system has gray areas in it where some players may be serviceable but not perfect fits, which poses questions to GMs. Do you draft that potential superstar QB and then change your scheme to accommodate them? Is it better to play the rookie who fits your scheme versus the vet who isn't but is currently rated higher?

XP is earned for on-the-field actions like previous years, but when you assign an earned skill point into an archetype like Red Zone Threat for a receiver, for instance, the game randomly decides which attributes within that archetype improve. In this case, a player's catch or short route running might improve, but unlike in the past, gamers won't have the ability to specifically choose which. The randomness takes away control, but it also matches the fact that in real life you never know how a player is going to progress or regress from year to year.

The scheme-fits concept is more about the season-to-season planning in the GM's office than players feeling different from week-to-week, but on the field Madden 19 continues to work on the smoothness of players' movements. Users have new tools for navigating the offensive line and accelerating in the open field revolving around players planting their foot and bursting forward. Catching animations have been tightened to improve both receivers' timing and increase the types of incomplete passes.

Gameplay is also more at the center of the next chapter in the series' story mode entitled The Longshot: Homecoming. Players experience more regular Madden gameplay as Devin Wade tries to make a name for himself in the NFL, while his buddy Colt Cruise returns to their hometown of Mathis, Texas. Wade's storyline serves as a bridge into franchise mode, while the ending of The Longshot: Homecoming concludes in the solo challenges of the Ultimate Team mode.

The popular fantasy card-collecting mode gets its own overhaul with a new training system whereby certain cards' stats can be improved by quick-selling cards from your binder. This format also allows users to select players' chemistry styles, and in general users can earn more coins through Solo Battles. These are similar to FIFA's Squad Battles where coins are paid out each week according to how many teams (based on other users' squads) you beat.

We're intrigued at the game's new team-building mechanics in franchise mode, which revolve around choice even though the process by which that happens ironically comes down to randomness. However, if we can build a competitive team through shrewd moves and maximize players' talents through smooth stick skills, it'll be a worthwhile tradeoff. **» Matthew Kato**

Do you build your franchise around an aging vet or start ushering in a new era?

Both offensive and defensive players have new options for these 1-on-1 encounters

49

GTFO

The deadliest prison work program

Platform: *PC* **Style:** *4-Player Online Shooter* **Publisher:** *10 Chambers Collective* **Developer:** *10 Chambers Collective* **Release:** *TBA*

Gamers have had a glut of interesting cooperative shooters to play in the last few years, but one curious absence in the current co-op landscape is a survival-horror experience akin to the cult favorite Left 4 Dead franchise. A lot of games are rushing to fill that void, and GTFO looks to be one of the more interesting efforts.

This universe isn't another me-too zombie game sending waves of brain-eaters at your squad. Instead, players assume the role of prisoners sent into the depths of a mysterious underground complex against their will to retrieve curious items of interest for their warden. Finding the objects is easy enough; making it out alive is the tricky part, as the halls are roamed by deadly monstrosities that look like grotesque evolutions of The Last of Us' clickers.

Coming from some former Payday developers, you could expect GTFO to simply throw unrelenting waves of enemies at the players, but it's a much more rhythmic experience, shifting from quiet moments of stealth and resource gathering to the more deadly enemy onslaughts. Giving players a breather is a welcome evolution, as supplies can be scarce and making sure everyone has at least a few clips and access to a med kit is crucial before engaging the next encounter.

GTFO pulls no punches. The missions can be unapologetically hard, demanding constant communication between squad mates if you want to make it to the extraction point. The missions are tiered so players must complete three jobs before they get to one that provides a loot drop. 10 Chambers Collective founder Ulf Andersson says they want to slow the reward drip so each time you get an item it feels more meaningful.

The GTFO beta is currently scheduled to drop later this year. I only experienced a brief slice of gameplay, but the emphasis on teamwork and suffocating tension make this one worth watching. » ***Matt Bertz***

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DAY 1
MERCIA
VALDER

Wargroove

Making all the right moves

Platform: *PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC* **Style:** *1 to 4-Player Strategy (4-Player Online)* **Publisher:** *Chucklefish* **Developer:** *Chucklefish* **Release:** *2018*

Wargroove takes heavy inspiration from Nintendo's turn-based strategy series Advance Wars, to the point where the differences between the two can seem minor. Instead of planting your unit inside a city to capture it over two turns, for example, you stand beside it. Captured areas are also fortified and harder to recapture, meaning it's much harder to trade territory back and forth. But these differences are impactful enough that, even as a veteran of both Advance Wars and Fire Emblem, it took me a while to find my footing.

But that's a good thing, as most games that have tried to capture the magic of Nintendo's strategy series have stuck a little too close to its formula, and the few deviations have been for the worse. Wargroove, on the other hand, is confident enough to find new twists, and isn't afraid to venture outside pure nostalgia. Commander units make it easy to clear out mobs of enemies attacking your base with their heightened stats and special moves, but losing them means losing the battle.

Wargroove also looks like it's found its aesthetic stride, as well as its mechanical one. Part of what makes Advance Wars so enduring is its undeniable charm, and Wargroove has charm to spare. One of the most useful units early on in maps are scouts, which happen to be adorable little pups. Though its pixelated look definitely elicits some fond memories, the little figures on the map pop with verve, making each match a little livelier, too.

While we haven't seen much of the single-player campaign yet, Wargroove is shaping up to be a solid strategy title, and with four-player local and online multiplayer, strategy fans looking to test their strategic mettle against each other should look to Wargroove to fill that urge when its hits later this year. » ***Suriel Vazquez***

reviews

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

92 The Awesome Adventures of Captain Spirit

Spending the morning doing chores in a dirty house may not sound like fun, but thanks to the power of imagination, The Awesome Adventures of Captain Spirit turns a routine day into something special. A young boy's superhero obsession transforms everyday events into high-stakes encounters – but it also helps him escape his difficult life at home. This new adventure in the Life is Strange universe (from series creator Dontnod Entertainment) introduces concepts and characters for the upcoming Life is Strange 2, but it also stands alone as a unique story that is both sad and uplifting.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Sorry, your global account is not visible on this platform.

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

For more information on the age classification ratings in our reviews, head to gameinformer.com/ratings

Vampyr

Dripping with unrealized potential

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Focus Home Interactive **Developer** Dontnod Entertainment **Release** June 5 **Rating** M

POPLAR HOSPITAL

When I was a kid, I tried assembling a model car. This was back before "Nailed it!" was a meme (and before the internet in general), but I remember being disappointed by the disparity between the picture on the box and my final result. Compared to the idealized image, my car was lopsided, painted poorly, and glued together in the wrong places. This memory came back to me several times while playing Vampyr. Dontnod's gothic action/RPG has conceptual components that could have been assembled into a great open-world vampire experience, but they weren't. The gulf separating that perfect vision from the flawed reality is ever-apparent, and admirable ambitions can't atone for clumsy execution.

You play as Dr. Jonathan Reid, a recently transformed vampire who must balance his need for blood against his desire to help treat London's Spanish flu epidemic. The grim atmosphere is well-crafted, with evocative music punctuating your trips down foggy and deserted streets. You explore different parts of London, meet the residents, and fight beasts and hostile humans. The unique premise is Vampyr's biggest strength, putting players in the position of a morally upstanding character who has to wrestle with immoral impulses to hold a crumbling world together.

Despite an intriguing narrative backdrop, a meaty chunk of Vampyr's gameplay involves a clunky third-person combat system. Keeping an eye on your health, stamina, and blood (i.e. mana), you fight a too-small selection of enemy types like vampire hunters and zombie-like skals. You can also invest in various vampire powers, like a bloody claw slash or a blood shield that absorbs damage. These expand your options, but not enough; encounters are repetitive and the mechanics are functional at best, and battles never settle into a sweet spot because the action fluctuates wildly between too hard and too easy.

The team at Dontnod made it the player's responsibility to tune the difficulty through their choices, which creates major problems. If you want to get stronger and unlock more health, stamina, and vampiric abilities, you need to drink blood for XP. The only significant source of blood is civilians (all of which are named and have dialogue), and when you kill them, you are locking yourself out of potential side missions or story content. This choice is interesting in theory, but punitive in practice because the things you're weighing feel mismatched. One is narrative and one is mechanical, so you don't get the fun of seeing different-but-equivalent paths unfold.

Considering how brutally difficult combat becomes if you elect not to feed, all but the most hardcore players need to kill to improve their stats. To make each sacrifice count, you must get to know your victims to maximize the richness of their blood. This fascinating idea occasionally makes you feel like a twisted predator; you help people, heal sickness, and build friendships all to make your ultimate betrayal as bountiful as possible. However, the process of talking to people and interrogating their friends to get clues feels mechanical. I got so sick of the back-and-forth and fetch quests that I eventually just did a sweep of London and murdered every civilian I could in a single night. Districts collapsed, innocents died, and my bad ending was assured, but I got a ton of XP to spend on powers that made every battle thereafter a breeze.

Vampyr's attempts to let you forge your own destiny are ultimately unsatisfying. Though you can make decisions in dialogue trees, the game doesn't respond to those choices in interesting ways. How you deal with the community pillar in each district has the most noticeable repercussions, but the game doesn't provide a clear sense of what the outcomes might be. For instance, I unknowingly lost my opportunity to get an important treatment for other citizens by drinking the blood of a rogue nurse. I later learned that the optimal choice in these scenarios is to let the characters live – in which case, offering the decision seems pointless.

Vampyr is also riddled with basic technical problems like long loads, odd collision, and stilted animation. The rough edges can tap into a similar appeal that I find in games like Deadly Premonition or Earth Defense Force, but they are also frustrating – especially when the whole game crashes at critical moments. Nothing that Vampyr provides makes it worth putting up with these problems, or any of the other issues plaguing the game. Through the fog awkward mechanics and unsatisfying decisions (not to mention some dumb story twists), the fun and intriguing core of Vampyr is sometimes visible. Unfortunately, that fog lifts only rarely, leaving most of the experience shrouded in darkness. » **Joe Juba**

6

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Explore London in the early 20th century as a vampire doctor, and make decisions about who lives and dies

» Graphics
The visuals have a distinctly low-budget feel, from the outdated character models to the stiff animations

» Sound
Excellent atmospheric music, and good voice performances – but the latter is wasted on dull characters

» Playability
While the controls technically work, they never reach the point of feeling good or satisfying. A bunch of technical issues also make Vampyr hard to enjoy

» Entertainment
Vampyr attempts to deliver a gothic fantasy, and while it has bright spots, too much goes wrong to let them shine through

» Replay Value
Moderate

Jurassic World Evolution

Life doesn't always find a way

7

Style 1-Player Simulation **Publisher** Frontier Developments **Developer** Frontier Developments **Release** June 12 **Rating** T

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Create parks full of dinosaurs and keep them from eating your guests

» Graphics
The dinosaurs look nice, but the stock scenery gets bland after a few islands

» Sound
While the first few roars induce an appropriate amount of dino excitement, there's nothing special here

» Playability
Extremely easy to pick up and play for gamers of any skill level, but the later areas have a significant difficulty increase

» Entertainment
Creating a dinosaur theme park is a fun exercise, but many of the mechanics and lack of real options weigh down the simulation

» Replay Value
Moderate

From your opening moments creating a small park with a handful of dinosaurs while you listen to Jeff Goldblum give appropriately cheeky warnings to deadly dinosaur breakouts and jealous sabotage efforts later, Jurassic World Evolution is true to its franchise roots.

At its best, you're basking in the glory of your genetically modified titans bringing in tons of cash and visitors, living up the John Hammond dream. At its worst, you're engaging with a deluge of menus, timers, and minutia that feel like fulfilling annoying chores, all while babysitting cooldowns and constantly clicking away. Jurassic World Evolution serves up a serviceable (and sometimes fun) fantasy for franchise lovers, but falls flat in critical aspects when it comes to consistent enjoyment.

You have five main islands to unlock and explore, beginning with a lovely little tutorial experience that provides some of the best hours of the game. Learning to complete contracts for cash and new building options, create efficient housing for your dinosaurs, and handle research, expeditions, power outages, and dinosaur escapes is all smooth sailing. Later on, you can unlock a sandbox island, Isla Nublar, where you can play around with unlimited resources and get goofy with your herd. Between these two entertaining extremes lies the meat of the game, and that's where things get frustrating and messy.

Because this is a Jurassic Park game, dinosaurs get out of their pens and wreak havoc. The first few times, I had fun sending helicopters out to tranquilize and move the errant creations back into their enclosures. Issues arise from a management perspective in the islands that follow your initial jaunt. You're continuously battling a barrage of timers – watching research tick down, waiting for a dinosaur to spawn, setting your ranger teams on missions to replenish food supplies, repair fences, cure disease, and restore power to your accident-prone facilities. These constant cooldowns for your attention feel like a poor mobile game, where you're inundated with objects requiring an exhausting marathon of click management.

Options also feel limited. While the contract system gives you different goals to unlock new buildings and procure significant resources, the challenges are often bland, simply getting to a new tier of income or creating some dinosaurs. Reputation gains with the three factions unlock a few new options, but they leave you with little room for meaningful decision making – even in the later islands where you must manage devastating weather or budget crunches.

Dinosaurs are the star of the show, whether they are devouring your guests and causing subsequent lawsuits, or gently eating ferns in front of a crowd. Playing with their DNA isn't a completely freeform experience, but the process has enough differentiation to experiment and have a good time. Priming dinosaurs with curious colors, longevity and disease resistance, or gearing them up for gladiatorial combat (yes, some contracts will task you with getting your dinos into a brawl) keeps you coming back to tweak your stable. Busting out bigger and better creatures as you move from island to island is a satisfying progression loop that keeps goading you forward, like a goat bleating in front of a *Tyrannosaurus rex* paddock.

Jurassic World Evolution is a mixed experience, at times reveling in its fantasy and becoming bogged down in its own systems in others. If you're a fan of the franchise it's a fun dip into the prehistoric pool, but the water isn't deep enough to satisfy a voracious carnivore.
» **Daniel Tack**

Yoku's Island Express

Part Pinball. Part Metroidvania. All fun

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Team 17 **Developer** Villa Gorilla **Release** May 29 **Rating** E10+

8.5

PS4 • Xbox One Switch • PC

» Concept
Pinball meets Metroidvania in a beautifully crafted adventure unlike anything else out there

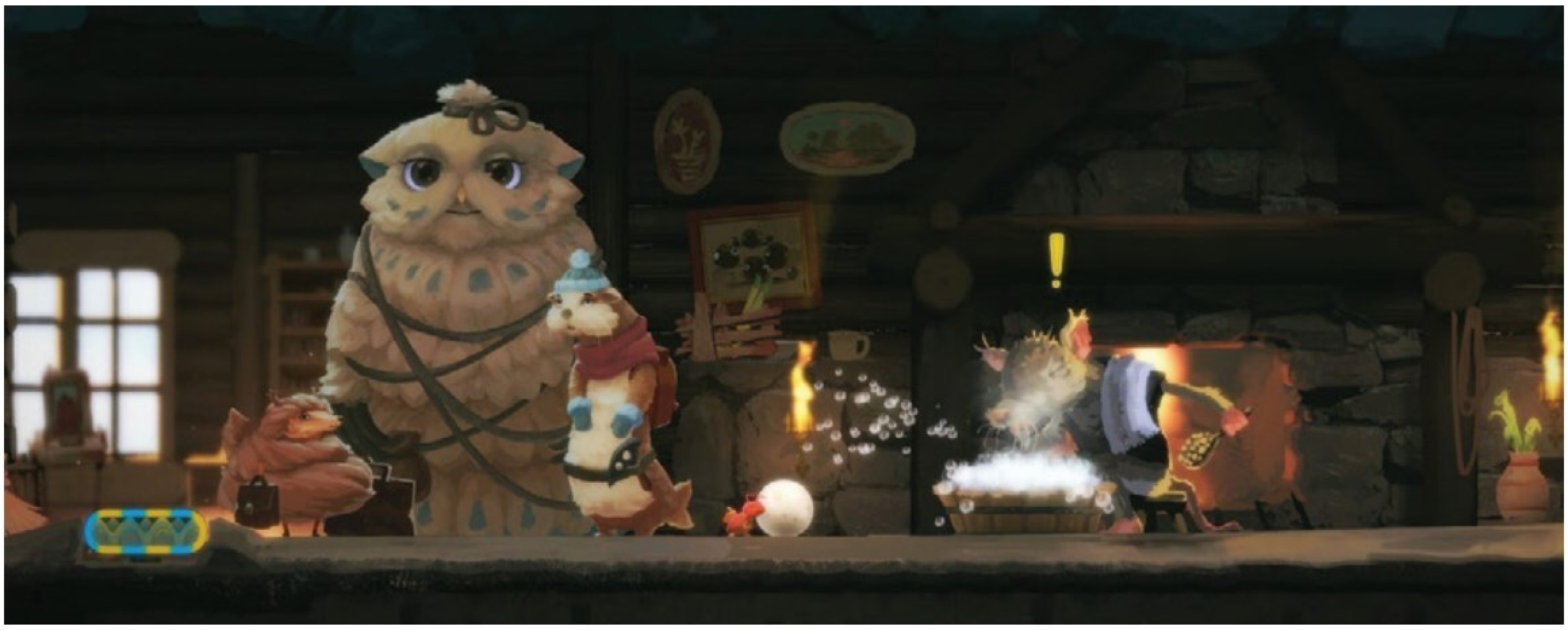
» Graphics
A vibrantly detailed world reveals large creatures and stunning sights. I like how specific colors are avoided in the world and are only used on the flippers

» Sound
The excellent score is jovial with unexpected genre twists, even shifting to jazz for a specific moment

» Playability
Most movement is handled by hitting a flipper and watching the ball sail. The timing of this action is spot on, allowing for harder shots to be made consistently

» Entertainment
To think, Sonic Spinball was onto something all of those years ago. Yoku's Island Express is delightful and fun from start to finish

» Replay Value
Moderate



If you can wrap your brain around what developer Villa Gorilla calls an "open-world Metroidvania pinball adventure," and you don't mind playing as a spry dung beetle, you're in for a unique and wholly satisfying treat. Yoku's Island Express turns the simple action of hitting a ball with a flipper into a joyous journey through a world filled with quests and secrets galore. This odd mash-up of genres works better than you might think.

The player assumes the role of Yoku, who happens to be tethered to a ball of petrified feces. As disgusting as this object may sound, Yoku uses it as a means of locomotion. He's tied to it via a short rope, and he mostly has to hold on for dear life. Yoku has just taken on the role of Mokumana Island's postman, and he needs to cover ground quickly if he wants to deliver mail before the island god brings torrential rain and quakes. Yoku can freely push the ball to the left or right, but can't jump or do much of anything other than blow on a whistle. When stacked up against the Samuses and Alucards of games of this ilk, he's easily the weakest and most useless of the lot. Thankfully, the world itself is filled with colored flippers that can propel Yoku and his ball wherever he needs to go.

The island design is so good that a flipper is always where you want it to be, yet the placement doesn't always tip off a clear path to where you need to go. You know the flipper propels you upward, but it may take you to a ramp that swirls into an underground cavern, or it may launch you into a bumper that sends you off in an unintended direction. I frequently looked at the map trying to make heads or tails of the puzzle-like world design. Figuring out which flipper or path is the right one is part of the fun; even when you have a path charted, timing sometimes comes into play, as some locations can only be reached from a precise hit on the flipper.

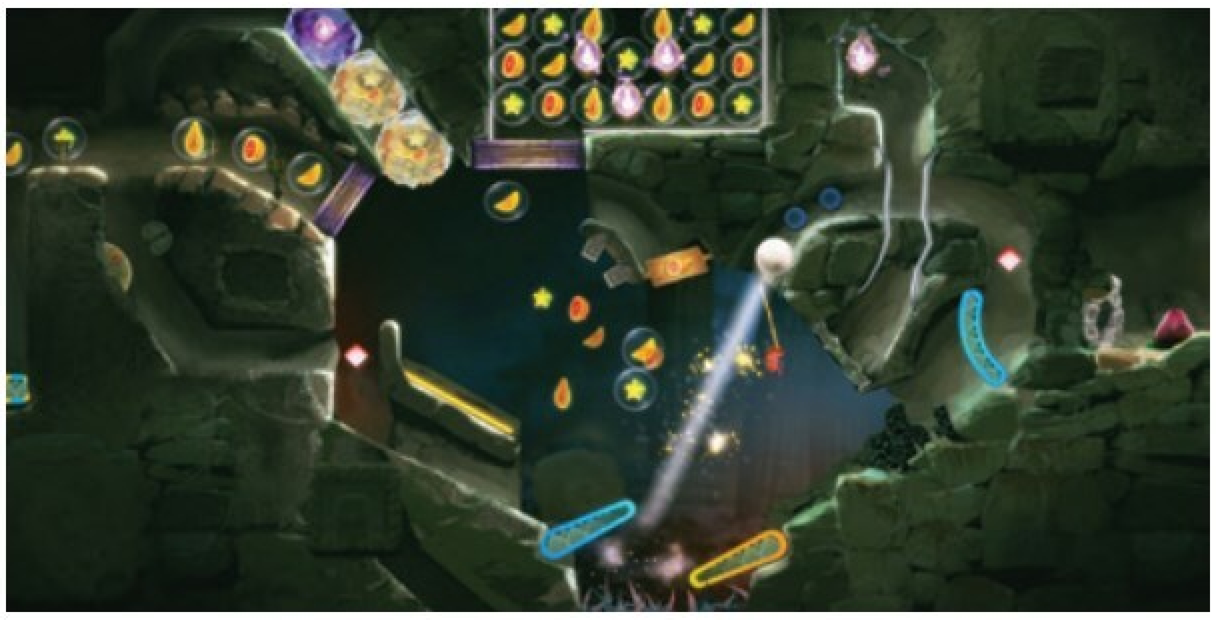
All of the pinball basics are firmly established in this adventure, outside of tilting. The drain between the two flippers is often occupied by thorny briar, which hurts Yoku and makes him drop some fruit (the game's form of currency). Collecting fruit isn't a hassle, but this act encourages thorough exploration, as you'll need to cash it in to open up new routes, quests, and handy items.

Yoku never needs to score points or keep a ball alive for extended periods of time. That said, some areas on the island are essentially pinball tables. They are closed-off spaces featuring ramps, bumpers, and switches. These tables are designed well, delivering frantic flipper action and skillful shooting, all while maintaining the feeling that they are a part of an adventure.

The nerve-racking concept of multiball is used in a clever way in Yoku's Island Express, but I don't want to spoil exactly how, as it is tied to the larger story and one of its better quests. You find quests littered across the sprawling map, many leading you to new locations or back to previous ones (with new powers that allow you to access different areas). Powers include the ability to swim by latching a fish onto the dung ball, and a grapple-like swing using the mouth of a hungry plant. These skills add variety to the ball-smacking action, although the timing of the grapple is tricky, often forcing me to retry a sequence over and over again.

Some areas lead to boss encounters. These giant or agile beasts don't like getting smacked with a ball, and may have some ways to create obstacles that prevent you from lining up shots. These battles get the blood pumping, but never once do you fear you will fail in any way, as Yoku's Island Express doesn't have any fail states. At worst, you lose fruit and have to obtain more, or have to fire off shot after shot to hit your mark. The most stress comes from figuring out how to navigate the land without getting lost. Exploring the island is a little annoying in the opening moments, but becomes hassle free once a slick fast-travel system is activated.

When the credits rolled, I had only unearthed 57 percent of the content, and was eager to jump back in to unlock the big secrets, which are teased nicely at specific points during play. The critical path in Yoku's Island Express can be completed quickly, and there could definitely be more meat on that bone, but it's a journey I urge every pinball and Metroidvania fanatic to play. Villa Gorilla doesn't just introduce a new concept to gaming – it has full ownership of it, and shows us just how fun it can be.
» Andrew Reiner



The Awesome Adventures Of Captain Spirit

A great escape

8.5

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
A new story in the Life is Strange universe that introduces Chris, a boy with challenging circumstances and a big imagination

» Graphics
The visuals aren't leagues beyond previous Life is Strange titles, but the aesthetic still works well

» Sound
Good voice performances backed up by an excellent mellow indie soundtrack that has become a Life is Strange hallmark

» Playability
You control where Chris walks and what he interacts with, and those simple actions are easy to perform

» Entertainment
This inventive tale can be uplifting one minute and disheartening the next, but it strikes a consistent and compelling tone

» Replay Value
Moderate

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Dontnod Entertainment **Release** June 26 **Rating** M

Video games are often described within the context of escapism, immersing players in wondrous worlds and putting them at the center of epic quests. From that angle, The Awesome Adventures of Captain Spirit is relatively mundane; it's set in a plain house on a regular Saturday morning, and stars a typical kid obsessed with superheroes, robots, and dinosaurs. Even so, the concept of taking refuge in fantasy is the compelling core of this sad and powerful story, which is partially about the places we escape to, but even more about the situations we escape from.

It may not have "Life is Strange" in the title, but The Awesome Adventures of Captain Spirit is a new (and free) tale in that universe from series creator Dontnod Entertainment. Players control Chris, a 10-year-old boy who lives alone with his dad. Chris' mom was killed a few years ago, his dad is an alcoholic, and life in their house is not easy. The situation is painful, but it also paves the way for the game's best narrative flourish: As a reprieve from his unpleasant reality, Chris often retreats to a fantasy world in which he becomes the heroic Captain Spirit.

You spend most of your time doing chores in the house and yard. The gameplay consists mainly of walking around and examining highlighted objects, but Chris' wild imagination transforms these interactions into comic-book scenarios that capture an authentic sense of playfulness. Through the eyes of Captain Spirit, a beat-up truck is a spaceship waiting for take-off. A box of mementos is a secret treasure to protect. A water heater is a sinister foe lurking in the dark. These vignettes are creative and interesting, whether they are accompanied by visual transformations, sci-fi sound effects, or simple dialogue. I always looked forward to seeing how the spectacle of these scenes contrasted with Chris' normal actions in reality.

At the same time, these interludes are also bittersweet, because you can't separate them from their sad circumstances. Chris' dad spends the morning drinking whiskey in front of the TV, leaving Chris to tidy up the filthy house, do laundry, and wash dishes. Left with these lonely tasks, it's no surprise that Chris turns to a superhero alter-ego to make his life more exciting. Sometimes, you even get the option to super-charge your basic interactions, like "irradiating" the mac and cheese you're microwaving, or turning on a TV with your mind (and a remote control). All of these retreats into imaginary exploits remind me of a less grotesque *Pan's Labyrinth* (or a darker *Calvin & Hobbes*), and are portrayed in a way that feel genuine.

The insidious nature of the dad's drinking problem is also handled deftly. Alcoholic parents are often shown as screaming and slovenly monsters, but here the menace is more complicated. In one scene, Chris' dad worriedly asks if anyone has noticed the bruises on Chris' arm. But minutes later, the two characters are playfully shooting Nerf darts and pretending to be monsters. These interactions are complex and uncomfortable; you see the world from Chris' perspective, and it emphasizes how difficult it is for children to process bad situations – especially involving the people they love.

Though the general scenario and storytelling prove captivating, the segments that lean into more traditional adventure game mechanics are the weakest. Aligning two images to make a map, or finding a PIN to unlock a phone isn't fun, and does more to pull you out of the world than draw you in.

Normally, games like this depend on satisfying narrative arcs to keep players engaged, but not this one. Instead of feeling like the first chapter in a multi-part story, The Awesome Adventures of Captain Spirit is more like a snapshot. It only takes a couple hours to finish, and depicts a routine day in the life of Chris and his dad. It has explicit connections to the upcoming Life is Strange 2 that have me excited, but The Awesome Adventures of Captain Spirit also stands alone as a clever and heartbreaking look at a kid who deserves better. » **Joe Juba**

Mario Tennis Aces

A successful return serve

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Camelot **Release** June 22 **Rating** E

Nintendo and Camelot released Mario Tennis Ultra Smash for Wii U in 2015, and it was a shallow impersonation of the other games in the franchise. It did not have a campaign or interesting modes, and the one thing that set it apart, the Mega Mushroom power-up, was lame. Mario Tennis Aces rights the ship in a big way by adding a full story mode with RPG elements and the new Zone Shot mechanic, which is satisfying to pull off and integral to play.

The star of Aces is adventure mode, in which the people of Mushroom Kingdom inexplicably get obsessed with tennis, and Mario deals with a mystical racket that turns Luigi evil and Wario and Waluigi slightly more evil than usual. As you make your way to the final villain, you partake in minigames, level up, collect new rackets, solve puzzles, and fight bosses that all revolve around tennis.

Leveling up increases stats like your movement speed and power, and I enjoyed seeing them climb even if the upgrades didn't result in huge boosts. More so than standard leveling, acquiring new rackets is the main draw. Every racket you collect has a strange design, is more powerful than the previous one, and you get to take every racket into every match. If you don't counter powerful shots correctly, your racket takes damage and eventually shatters, and you can perform the opposite trick on opponents to shatter their rackets. The more rackets you have, the more you can afford to break, which lets you play longer against the stronger opponents.

The bosses are a highlight, requiring Mario to aim for specific weak spots on large enemies, avoid Petey Piranha's fireballs, or dodge a giant tentacle in a fight against a giant squid. I enjoyed all the non-traditional tennis minigames, too, like taking out a certain number of Koopa Troopers by whacking them with tennis balls, or figuring out which mirror to hit in a haunted mansion. The standard tennis matches against A.I. spike in difficulty frequently. Beyond the A.I. getting increasingly better, other frustrations make matches feel unfair, like explosive mechanical Bowsers appearing only on your side of the court.

The core tennis hasn't changed much compared to previous entries. Aces adds a new power meter for pulling off trick shots with the right control stick, slowing down time, and executing the new Zone Shot mechanic. When you've powered up enough, you can jump in the air to hit the ball and the camera moves to first-person to give you hyper-accurate aim. Pulling off a high-speed Zone Shot is satisfying, and enough counters are in place to prevent it from being overpowered when used against you. The Zone Shot is integrated well and I was excited to use it during every match.

The smart move with the Zone Shot is to fire the ball just out of reach of your opponent, but you can also use it to break your opponent's rackets to make them lose automatically. This strategy was my favorite way to win a match, and it also became my best option when the difficulty spiked during the campaign.

Multiplayer options are plentiful with online play, local multiplayer, and even offline Switch-to-Switch play. The option to play four-player doubles on two Switches is welcome. I had the most fun going one-on-one, as it keeps the court clutter-free and dials down the chaos. The Zone Shot mechanic is also simple enough that quickly getting a newcomer opponent up to speed on how it works isn't too time-consuming.

A separate Swing Mode lets you swing the Joy-Con like a tennis racket to play. Pantomiming a true swing drove the ball out of bounds more often than not, but I also found that simply tossing the Joy-Con up in the air when the ball was near would usually execute a successful volley. I am glad Swing Mode is an optional mode. It may allow you to relive your favorite Wii Sports tennis memories, but the inconsistency of swinging is more annoying than novel or fun.

Aces delivers as a competent arcade tennis game, and the new mechanics are fun and important enough that I would be surprised to see them removed in a future Mario Tennis. The difficulty spikes in the campaign are frustrating, but not impossible to overcome. Leveling Mario even as you fail makes the losses sting less (though I would have killed for a quick retry option) and I was always eager to see what I would be doing next.

» **Kyle Hilliard**

8

Switch

» **Concept**
Assist Mario on his journey to save the world with his tennis skills. Or just play tennis with your friends

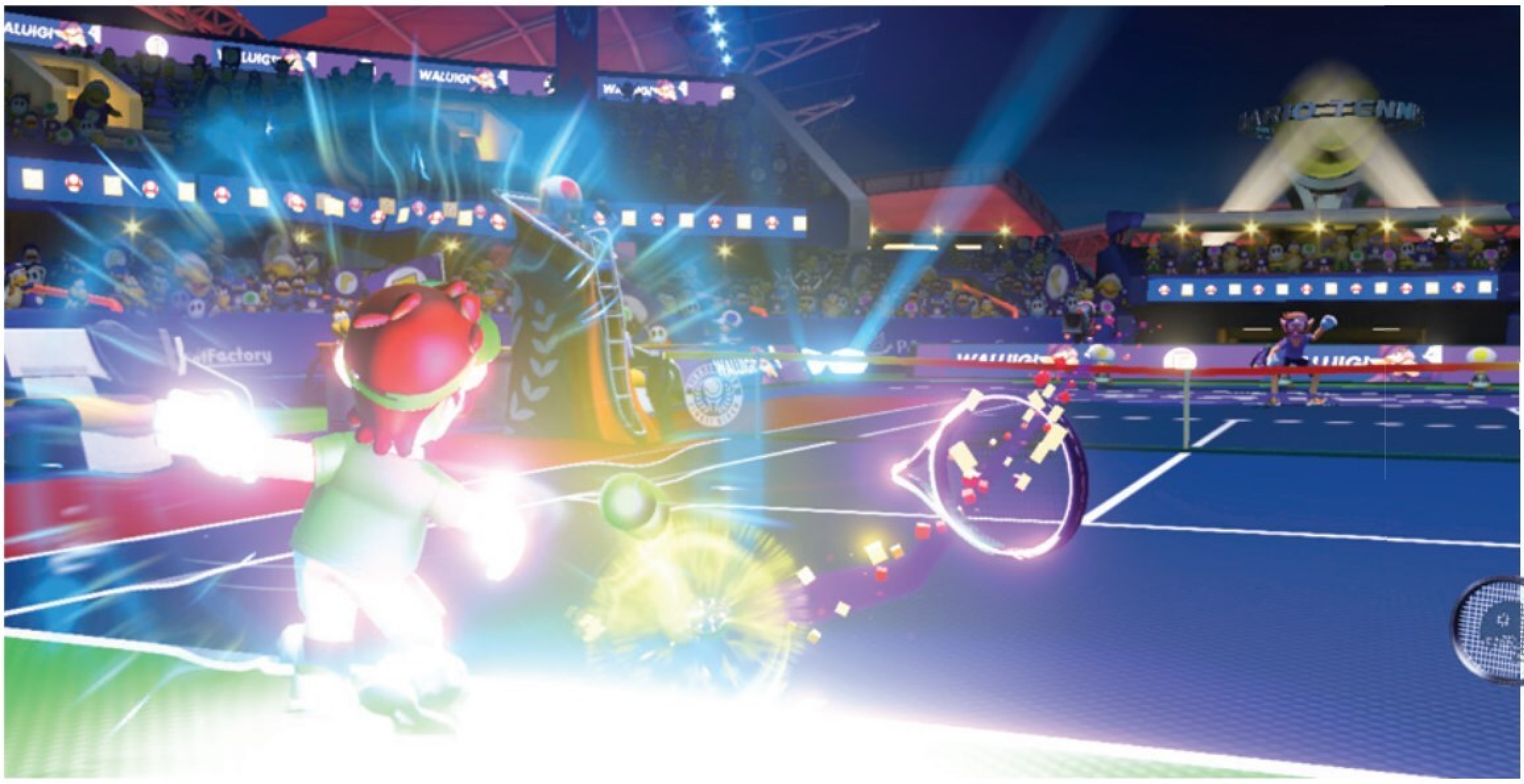
» **Graphics**
The character models and environments look great from a distance, but when the replay camera zooms in for close-ups, some textures do not hold up to close inspection

» **Sound**
The music is bubbly in typical Mario fashion and the familiar whack of tennis balls against rackets sound accurate

» **Playability**
Moving the characters around the court feels smooth, and pulling off a killer shot is satisfying. The optional motion controls are not great, but I like them for aiming the new Zone Shot mechanic

» **Entertainment**
The core arcade tennis is fun, and collecting rackets and leveling up Mario's tennis abilities through the campaign is a worthwhile endeavor, even if a few difficulty spikes hurt the pace

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high



8 Unravel Two

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC **Release** June 9
Rating E

Unravel Two delivers a strong platforming experience for players of all skill levels. Whether you want a unique side-scroller to play alone or a teamwork-emphasizing experience to play with a friend, this is worth a look. ***– Brian Shea***

7.75 Dillon's Dead-Heat Breakers

Platform 3DS **Release** May 24 **Rating** E

The muck you must wade through before you get to the action is unavoidable, but when you do finally get through, it's compelling. Speeding around the levels as Dillon, slamming into enemies, and pulling off last-second saves as animal versions of my friends and family cheer me on is exhilarating. ***– Kyle Hilliard***

7 Moonlighter

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC
Release May 29 **Rating** E10+

Moonlighter isn't the only item-store simulator out there, but it sets itself apart from the competition with its fantastic retro atmosphere. The pixel art and music evoke a unique retro aesthetic without feeling like cheap nostalgia, which is rare feat. Beneath that alluring presentation is a formula that provides a few hours of simple fun. ***– Joe Juba***

6 Pokémon Quest

Platform Switch
Release May 29 **Rating** E

Pokémon Quest delivers cute moments, but the novelty wears off fast. By the time I reached the later stages, I was disenchanted by the necessary grinding and random elements permeating nearly every aspect. ***– Brian Shea***

3.5 Agony

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC
Release May 29 **Rating** M

The gory shock tactics try too hard to impress, and are ultimately a moot point given just how effective the game's brokenness is at dispelling any palpable fear or awe I might have had and replacing it with aggravation. ***– Javy Gwaltney***

6 House Flipper

Platform PC **Release** May 17 **Rating** NR

House Flipper seems like a killer idea for a sim game, and while your first few sales deliver some of the before-and-after magic, the game fails to capture the larger remodeling fantasy. ***– Jeff Marchiafava***

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for the full reviews

7.75 Sushi Striker: The Way Of Sushido

Platform Switch, 3DS
Release June 8 **Rating** E

Accuracy using the controller is an issue, but it is an occasional annoyance as opposed to consistent frustration. Watching your level and your Sprites grow as you match sushi plates is exciting, and the charming world is like the little bit of gari at the edge of your sushi plate. ***– Kyle Hilliard***

4 Tennis World Tour

Platform PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC
Release May 22 **Rating** E

You could reductively describe tennis as a sport where you hit the ball back and forth. That would be unfair since it strips away the strategy and physical feats – which is exactly what Tennis World Tour does to the sport. ***– Matthew Kato***

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E3 2018 NO-SHOWS

by Joe Juba

The E3 show floor had some great games, but a number of high-profile projects were nowhere to be seen. From announced games that have gone quiet to confirmed projects that still need a big unveiling, these were the major titles that missed the chance to show us more.

» FINAL FANTASY VII REMAKE

You would think Square Enix might have learned its lesson about announcing Final Fantasy games too early. And yet, this remake's big reveal was three years ago, and we still know alarmingly little about it. By leaving this title out of its E3 plans, Square Enix is not sending a reassuring message to fans.

» YOSHI

Some Nintendo fans were hoping for an update on Yoshi's crafty new adventure, since it was announced with a 2018 release date. Nintendo did provide an update, but not the kind gamers were hoping for: Yoshi's new game on Switch has been delayed to 2019.

» METROID PRIME 4

Speaking of Switch games that disappeared after a dramatic reveal, Metroid Prime 4 was nowhere to be seen this year. Nintendo offered an explanation that basically boils down to: Metroid Prime 4 is not a near-term release, and isn't ready to show yet.

» DARKSIDERS III

Last year, THQ Nordic revealed Darksiders III. But the game hasn't had any major appearances since, and E3 2018 didn't change that. In fact, THQ Nordic as a whole skipped the show – a fact the company announced with a press release claiming that it was watching the FIFA World Cup instead.

» TITANFALL 3

We loved Titanfall 2, and EA has confirmed another one is in the works. With the tease that developer Respawn would be revealing a game at E3, it seemed like we had a chance to see Titanfall 3. That didn't pan out, but we did learn about Jedi: Fallen Order, so it's hard to complain.

» BORDERLANDS 3

We know this game is happening (and have even seen some tech), so when the infamous Walmart Canada leak hinted an official reveal, fans got excited. Gearbox tried to temper expectations by announcing beforehand that the game would not be E3, but it still stings.

» RED DEAD REDEMPTION II

Rockstar doesn't really do E3 anymore, so no one was surprised when Red Dead Redemption II didn't have a presence. Regardless, it would have been nice to see the company take the stage at a press briefing to feed our bottomless hunger for more details.

» THE AVENGERS

Two Square Enix studios – Crystal Dynamics and Eidos Montreal – are currently working on a project (or projects) related to Marvel's Avengers. This was announced back in early 2017, but we haven't actually seen any fruits of that labor. Marvel stuff is still hot, so this E3 could have been the perfect debut, but no such luck.

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